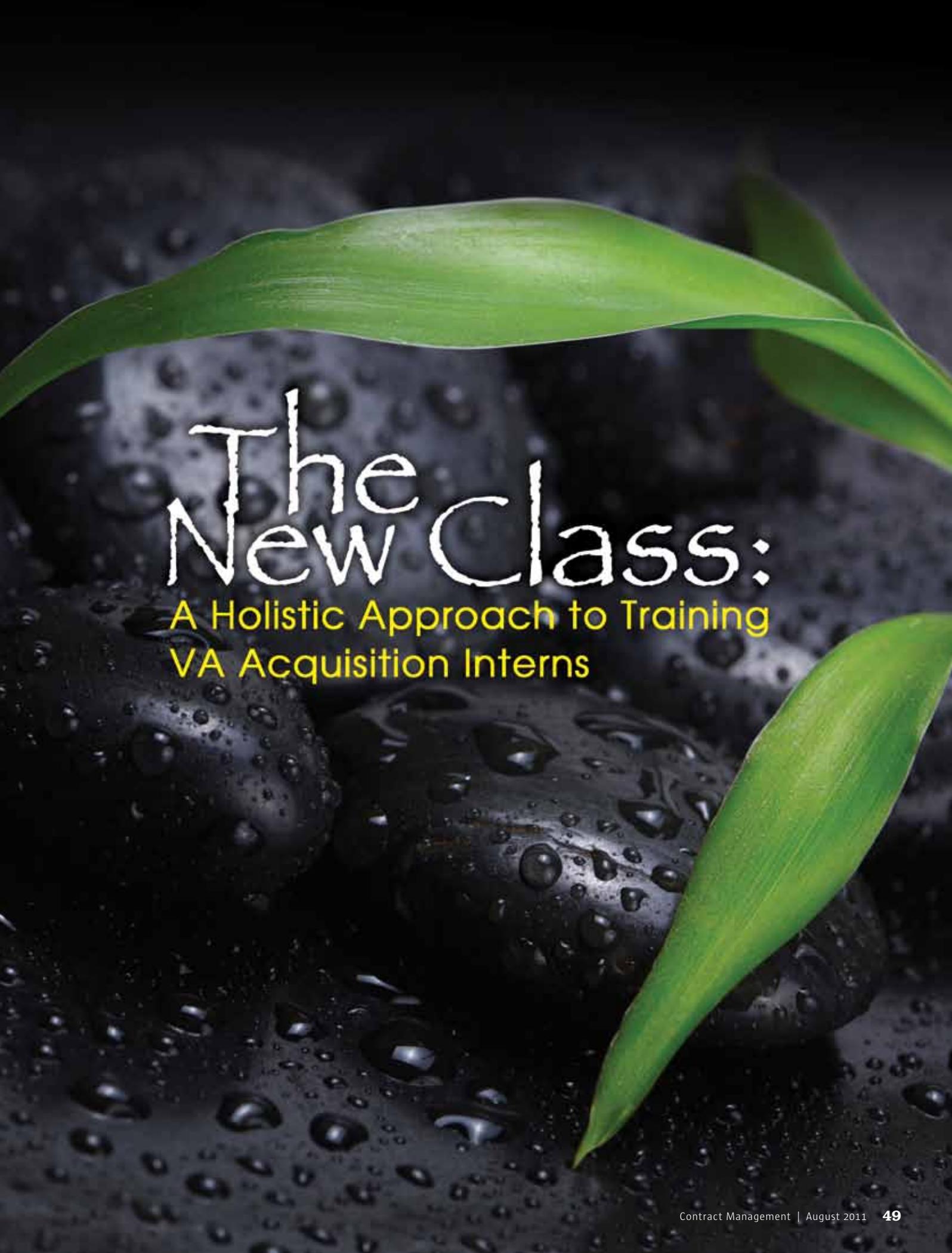




The Department of Veterans  
Affairs Acquisition Academy  
is pioneering a new approach  
to training the next generation  
of trusted business partners.

*By Jan Frye*



# The New Class:

A Holistic Approach to Training  
VA Acquisition Interns

It started with a need. After two decades of downsizing, hiring freezes, and congressional scrutiny, the U.S. acquisition workforce was thrust into the spotlight as the talent drain of the 1990s manifested itself through an aging workforce struggling to pass knowledge on to the next generation. As U.S. federal government spending continues to increase at an accelerating rate, exceeding the growth rate of the workforce, the need for new training and development initiatives to develop future acquisition leaders is more urgent than ever before.



The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was particularly challenged to execute its exponential budget growth for increasingly complex systems, programs, and real property capital improvement efforts as it began its 21st century transformation. A study conducted in 2007 by PricewaterhouseCoopers of the VA Acquisition organization's current and prospective business models triggered the establishment of a departmentwide goal for the development of an acquisition training academy focused on core competencies, general business skills, communication skills, and customer service.

Lisa Doyle, a career-long member of the acquisition community through both public and private sector involvement, took this goal to reality and beyond. As chancellor of the VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA), Doyle and her team opened the doors in September 2008 to a 16-classroom facility in Frederick, Maryland. The mission was clear if not daunting: train the current and next generation of VA acquisition professionals to support the department's \$15.7 billion annual spend. The VAAA currently houses the Acquisition Internship School, Contracting Professional School, and Program Management School and plans to open the Facilities Management School and the Supply Chain Management School later in 2011.

## Stewards of a \$500 Billion Trust

The U.S. federal government spends in excess of \$500 billion annually, and it is the community of acquisition professionals who are responsible to the taxpayers for making sure that value is returned on every dollar spent. Progress in developing this workforce is now being made, as attention from the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) reestablished expectations for a governmentwide training framework and the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) identified core technical and general business competencies for the acquisition professional.

These efforts reflect an evolving positive attitude toward the acquisition profession. Prior to the downsizing during the 1990s, civil servants in the contracting and pro-

urement career fields lacked professional recognition and were sometimes regarded as "clerks" and "paper pushers," which unfairly devalued their role. Compounding this attitude toward the contract specialist were significant regulatory changes aimed at simplifying, streamlining, and decentralizing the procurement effort. The Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 and the Federal Acquisition Reform Act of 1996, although groundbreaking for contracting personnel, did little to alter the attitudes of senior leaders and program managers within the acquisition workforce. Additionally, these regulatory changes had the (perhaps unintended) consequence of increasing the use of government purchase card programs by non-procurement personnel. The fanfare surrounding the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, which contained language to further education, training, and professional development opportunities for the acquisition workforce, focused significantly more on changes to information technology architecture. Clinger-Cohen's lack of focus on training and development was of particular concern for civilian agencies attempting to cope with human capital challenges without an equivalent to the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act of 1990.

Today, through the efforts of OFPP and FAI and the subsequent creation of programs such as VAAA's Acquisition Internship School, the focus is shifted toward creating trusted business partners who work hand-in-hand with their program customers throughout the entire phase of the procurement life cycle. Leaders in the field are redefining the role of the acquisition professional to be someone who exercises personal initiative and shares sound business advice with his or her customers to provide the best value product or service to meet the need.

## A Holistic Approach

Doyle and the VAAA team are using a holistic approach to workforce development that reflects FAI competencies and uses an experiential learning model to decrease the time to competency and improve performance on the job. The curriculum components forming this experiential learning model

are grounded in the "Guiding Principles" of the *Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)*, which motivate acquisition professionals to exercise discretionary authority and sound business judgment in applying the intent behind the requirements of the *FAR*.

The three-year curriculum of VAAA's flagship Acquisition Internship School employs an innovative scenario-driven approach facilitating the transference of *FAR* knowledge into practice through the creation of a "learning laboratory" classroom environment. Participants in the Acquisition Internship School get formal training on the *FAR* Guiding Principles through VAAA, which follows the contracting curriculum prescribed by FAI's Federal Acquisition Certification in Contracting structure. Interns attend CON courses to learn the principles of the *FAR*, just as any other acquisition professional. Whereas "working" professionals rely on the opportunities afforded them through their daily experience, the Acquisition Internship School manufactures these opportunities through the scenario-driven experiential learning model.

Within the "learning laboratory," interns are afforded great flexibility to try innovative contracting approaches and applications of the *FAR* Guiding Principles without fear of failure. The ability to develop this "*FAR* toolkit" is of great value to new professionals as it helps them understand and internalize the purpose of their training. It allows interns to take what they learn from their CON curriculum and immediately apply the skills using real, VA-centric contracting scenarios perpetuating the transfer of theory to knowledge to practice.

The technical skills that make up a significant focus of the Acquisition Internship School's curriculum are further supplemented by general business training, helping interns become everyday leaders in their field. Consistent with the holistic approach, a key tenet of Doyle and VAAA's vision, is not to train for the sake of training. In Doyle's own words: "We create learning interventions that change behavior and improve performance. We are not about check-the-box training."

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### Training the “Big A” Acquisition Workforce

Training at VAAA is not limited to acquisition interns. Two additional schools, the Contracting Professional School and the Program Management School, are a key part of VA’s human capital development strategy.

The Program Management School trains and certifies VA program and project managers and contracting officer technical representatives, helping them to develop the skills necessary to deliver projects on time and within budget to achieve the outcomes necessary to support VA’s mission. Since opening in spring 2010, the school has trained more than 1,879 VA program managers through the Frederick facility and a broad geographic network of class locations to support VA’s nationwide presence. For those counting at home, “that’s more than 225,000 hours of training delivery, but it’s about more than numbers,” said Program Management School Vice Chancellor Richard Garrison. “It’s about making an impact on VA’s program and project performance.”

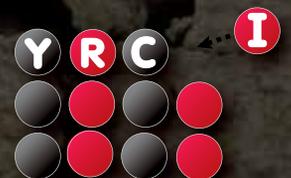
The vision and approach of the VAAA team is working. One notable example tells the story of a recent participant working on a complex capital asset management project that had seen its share of management challenges over the years. Using his learning experiences from the Program Management School, the participant was able to develop an integrated management plan and a cost/budget plan using the knowledge and skills developed in earned value management.



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—Lisa Doyle

Upon completing the Program Management School curriculum, graduates are eligible to obtain Federal Acquisition Certification in Program/Project Management (FAC-P/PM). In keeping with VAAA's desire to exceed "check-the-box" training, graduates of the school are reporting that they pay closer attention to the risk management strategies, acquisition planning, and cost/budget control processes they receive in their formal training.

The curriculum consists of four course segments in program/project management, acquisition management, business management for government applications, and leadership and interpersonal skills. This curriculum is helping to develop the future program managers alongside the future acquisition professionals being developed through the Acquisition Internship School.

As mentioned earlier, two additional schools are on schedule to open their doors later this year. The Facilities Management School will represent a specific track to support VA's broad network of medical, memorial, and benefits infrastructure while the Supply Chain Management School will train participants in the complicated logistical needs of the world's largest integrated health care system. VAAA's centralized model for training the stakeholders responsible for supporting the broad needs of "Big A" acquisition will support VA's strategic human capital needs by certifying the entire acquisition team.

### Everyday Leaders

VAAA students benefit from the sophisticated combination of technical skills and interpersonal skill development, and the resulting value is making a difference across VA's acquisition function. "Contracting officers across the country are taking note of the increased productivity," said Joanne Choy, vice chancellor of the Acquisition Internship School. "The number of

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job-hosting organizations within VA increased to more than 60 from one at the start of the program.” The reason, according to Choy, is that interns are demonstrating their competence and adding bench strength during their rotations. “During fiscal year 2010, our interns supported more than 1,000 VA contracts with a total value of approximately \$5.4 billion,” she said.

Testimonials were shared by two of those job-hosting locations. Elizabeth Youse, network contract manager for the VA Capital Health Care Network, told of the immediate impact her interns provided for the acquisition function:

During the rotations, they worked on acquisition projects for medical imaging, supplies and services, patient transportation, and hazardous waste removal contracts. I am very appreciative that the training is VA-oriented. It’s also helpful that they come in with knowledge of eCMS, VA’s electronic contracting system—a skill they need to have.

One of the academy’s biggest fans is Richard Edens, acquisition service chief for the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System. “The interns come with a strong, rounded technical and interpersonal skill set,” he said. “They understand contracting, know the terminology, have training in VA’s electronic contracting system, and know online tools like FedBizOps. They make an immediate impact and act as force multipliers.”

The scenario-driven experiential learning approach appeals to the adult learner and is consistent with simulated training environments used to develop human resources in other professional practices. VAAA’s instructional designers work to develop a learning laboratory to mimic the conditions of the real contracting environment through learning objectives using realistic VA solicitations and contracting documents, case studies based on Government Accountability Office reports and contractual disputes, and role-play exercises requiring the immediate application of theory to practice.

“We wanted to infuse VA examples into our curriculum to increase relevance,” said Doyle. The scenario-driven exercises “create a theory-to-practice connection for our students. It takes a highly-trained acquisition workforce to effectively award and manage contracts to execute [VA’s] critical missions.”

Fortunately for VA and the millions of veterans and family members of veterans who rely on VA for support, the work of Doyle and the VAAA team are contributing to a stronger and more capable 21st century VA. **CM**

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