



Department of Veterans Affairs Acquisition Academy

Making a Meaningful Difference

Laura Edwards



The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Acquisition Academy in Frederick, Md., opened in September 2008 to respond to the growing acquisition workforce challenges facing VA and the federal government overall. Two decades of downsizing and hiring freezes, and increased congressional scrutiny and oversight has strained an over-tasked acquisition workforce.

The 16-classroom bricks-and-mortar facility currently houses three professional schools: Acquisition Internship School, Contracting Professional School, and Program Management School; with two additional schools—Facilities Management School and Supply Chain Management School—scheduled to open in 2011. Using a centralized

training model, the VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA) trains and certifies the entire acquisition team including the next generation of acquisition professionals, program and project managers, contracting officer technical representatives, and the existing acquisition workforce.

“At the VA Acquisition Academy, we create learning interventions to change behavior and improve performance,” said VAAA Chancellor Lisa Doyle. “We are not about check-the-box training. We use a competency-based experiential learning model to make a substantial and immediate impact in VA’s acquisition workforce.”

The academy’s training programs are a critical element of VA’s succession planning and workforce development, designed to make a positive and meaningful improvement in the acquisition function.

Growing the Next Generation

The Acquisition Internship School was created to grow the next generation of acquisition professionals. The program uses a holistic approach to create trusted business advisors capable of exercising sound business judgment to achieve best value solutions.

“Technical skills are not enough,” remarked Doyle. “Our rigorous curriculum is grounded in the FAR [Federal Acquisition Regulation] Guiding Principles and includes interpersonal, program management, leadership, communication, innovative thinking, and risk management skills, in addition to the critical technical skills.

“The three-year internship program includes classroom training, skill building in a learning laboratory to solidify learning, and job rotations to provide practical hands-on experience in contracting offices,” she said.

The curriculum accelerates the learning curve to reduce time to performance; increases productivity; builds competence and confidence; emphasizes the translation of theory, fundamentals, and concepts to practical application; and evolves from basic to more complex acquisition strategies during the course of the internship.

“That translates into productive resources [interns] who create an immediate impact for the department,” said Doyle. “During fiscal year 2010, our interns supported more than 1,000 VA contracts with a total value of approximately \$5.4 billion. Their contributions have not gone unnoticed. In fact, we have increased the number of job-rotation hosting organizations within VA from one at the start of the program to 47. That’s a direct result of interns demonstrating their competence and being sought out by our contracting organizations.”

A representative of one hosting VA organization remarked, “I am one of your biggest fans. Many of the acquisitions we have

been able to accomplish are as a direct result of the quality of contract specialists your program is producing.”

A representative of another stated, “Thank you for allowing each of these individuals to participate and train here. Each of them has proved time and again how valuable your program is in providing experienced, well-trained personnel to the contracting community.”

“Another important part of our curriculum is mission service so that the interns understand who the customer is and how they contribute to the mission of serving veterans,” said Doyle. “The interns are exposed to what their job function means to VA’s mission, and it provides them an opportunity to see, touch, and feel our mission first-hand. We are extremely proud of our interns and look forward to their continued impact, resulting in better mission results for veterans.”

Program/Project Managers

Launched in March 2009, the Program/Project Management School was created for program/project managers and contracting officer technical representatives to develop the requisite skills to deliver projects on time, within budget, and that achieve the assigned outcomes in support of VA’s mission. These skills demand specialized training and development based on best practices.

“In its first year, the school trained 1,386 VA program managers with up to 400 students in class [at] locations across the country every day; but while 166,320 hours of training delivery is impressive, this effort is not about numbers,” said Richard Garrison, Program Management School vice-chancellor. “This effort is about impact to the VA’s program and project management performance,” he said.

A recent graduate said he is managing meetings more efficiently and paying close attention to risk and mitigation strategies as a result of the training.

“The action planning process is probably the most important takeaway,” he stated. “I have a much greater focus on areas for improvement that I wouldn’t have had without the training.”

A VA construction program manager said he is very metrics-focused as a result of the training.

“My acquisition planning is much more focused, scheduling is more precise because of the work breakdown structure, and I realized how earned value management has to be used if you’re using anything other than a firm-fixed-price contract,” he said.

The training consists of four course segments in program/project management, acquisition management, business management for government applications, and leadership and interpersonal skills, followed by a certification exam known as the Capstone. The curriculum also includes action planning.

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**—Lisa Doyle, chancellor,
Veterans Affairs Acquisition Academy**

"Functional knowledge, principles, and techniques are taught during the course segments," said Garrison, "then three to four months later, students attend the Capstone. The Capstone is an evaluation and validation of a student's skills."

Many participants remarked that they found the action planning particularly useful. "The action planning was most significant, offering the opportunity to really focus on areas that are important and need improvement," stated one student. Another participant said that the action planning helped to execute his ideas.

"This is an important part of the curriculum," stated Garrison. "Research has indicated that learning is far less likely to be retained and implemented, especially when dealing with technical skills, if that learning is not reinforced by follow-up once learners return to their workplace."

"It's the same experiential learning model that is used across the enterprise at the VA Acquisition Academy," Garrison continued. "We are making an immediate impact; improving how our programs are managed."

Nearly 50 percent of participants have identified opportunities for improving project management processes while the balance are focusing on improving communication, cost and performance, and other areas. Approximately 75 percent are rapidly improving VA processes, procedures, and artifacts within 1 to 3 months of the training investment; and 89 percent have compliant action plans.

"Ultimately," said Garrison, "we will know we are successful as more VA programs deliver their performance requirements on time and within budget."

While the adage "If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day; if you teach him how to fish, he eats for a lifetime" is true, it can take too long to train someone to fish, and he will perish if you do not feed him along the way. In that spirit, the Program Management School is beginning to focus on team training because for a program to be successful, teamwork is paramount.

"We are training VA's major initiatives about program management best practices as applied directly to their program. We then facilitate the application of those best practices in their program," said Garrison. "When the initiative completes these workshops, they have established a common picture of success: a common language and a common set of program management best practices. They also have an action plan to create their remaining program management artifacts with coaching available during those efforts."

Contracting Professionals

The Contracting Professional School serves the existing VA acquisition workforce with an objective to achieve and maintain required Office of Management and Budget certifications and to close competency proficiency gaps. Since it opened in September 2008, the school has trained 3,335 students with an average student course rating of excellent.

"Over the past year, we have worked with our training vendors to add civilian equivalent case studies and examples in our training to increase relevance," said Doyle. "The examples are practical to our students and create a meaningful theory-to-practice connection. We also developed a standardized student evaluation tool and commenced in-class instructor evaluations to ensure we are delivering the best training available," she said.

The Contracting Professional School has supported several other government agencies in their acquisition training.

Governmentwide Challenge

The development of the acquisition workforce is a challenge being faced by all federal agencies.

"It takes a highly trained acquisition workforce to effectively award and manage contracts to execute our critical missions," remarked Doyle. "To ensure the training being delivered is the best it can be, the Academy created a Learning Standards Office to evaluate and assess learning content, delivery, and instruction across the enterprise to ensure high-quality training. The VA Acquisition Academy is having a departmental impact on VA's acquisition workforce. My goal is to get it right for the VA and open it as a resource to other federal agencies," she said.

Edwards is public affairs officer for the VA Acquisition Academy. This article was a collaborative effort among academy staff. The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at Laura.Edwards2@va.gov.