



Left to right: Richard Garrison, vice chancellor for the Program Management School at the VA Acquisition Academy; Lisa Doyle, chancellor; and Joanne Choy, acting vice chancellor for the Acquisition Internship School.

Training the Next Generation of Acquisition Professionals

The VA Acquisition Academy's unique approach is having a substantial and immediate impact on the workforce challenges facing the Department and the rest of the federal government.

Training. It's what prepares a nurse for action during a code blue; what prepares a soldier to respond under mortar attack; what prepares an athlete to perform during competition; and what prepares a pilot to handle an emergency in the sky. Training is vital to organizational effectiveness.

The VA Acquisition Academy in Frederick, Md., is training and certifying the agency's entire acquisition team, including program and project managers, the next generation of acquisition professionals, contracting officer technical representatives, or COTRs, and the existing acquisition workforce so they are prepared to carry out their mission.

The Academy currently houses three professional schools—Program Management School, Acquisition Internship School and Contracting Professional School. Two additional schools—Facilities Management School and Supply Chain Management School—are scheduled to open this year. The 16-classroom bricks-and-mortar facility opened in September 2008 to respond to the growing acquisition workforce challenges facing VA and the federal government created by two decades of downsizing and hiring freezes.

The training delivered at the Academy is unique. An old Chinese proverb states: "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand." That's the same principle employed in the Academy's schools.

"We use a competency-based experiential learning model to make a substantial and immediate impact on VA's acquisition workforce," said VAAA Chancellor Lisa Doyle. "We create learning interventions that change behavior and improve performance. We are not about check-the-box training."

The Academy's training programs are designed to make a positive and

meaningful improvement in the acquisition function, and are a critical part of VA's succession planning and workforce development.

Program Management School

The Program Management School trains and certifies VA program and project managers and COTRs to develop the requisite skills to deliver projects on time, within budget, and that achieve the assigned outcomes in support of VA's mission.

The goal of the curriculum is to transform VA's acquisition workforce through an innovative training program and a follow-on action plan that tracks individual performance improvements learned in the classroom

"We create learning interventions that change behavior and improve performance. We are not about check-the-box training."

and applied back on the job. Graduates will obtain their Federal Acquisition Certification in Program/Project Management (FAC-P/PM).

In its first eight months, the school trained 1,386 VA program managers, with up to 400 students in class in locations across the country every day. "That's 166,320 hours of training delivery," said Program Management School Vice Chancellor Richard Garrison, "but it's about more than numbers. It's about making an impact on VA's program and project management performance."

And it's working. One notable example comes from a recent participant working on a complex capital as-

set management project that has been impacted by several major challenges over the years. The project involved the transfer of real property and involved federal and state agencies, as well as veteran stakeholder groups.

As an outcome of the FAC-P/PM training action plan, the participant developed an integrated management plan and a cost/budget plan using earned value management.

"We've made a significant turnaround with these improvements," he said. "As a result, the IMP was developed and implemented and delayed tasks have been put back on track with active engagement by all key stakeholders."

"We are pleased to report that

this \$200 million Base Realignment and Closure property acquisition and \$200 million major construction project has been put back on track, and we have received external stakeholder buy-in. The take-away from the FAC-P/PM training certainly contributed to our success."

Graduates have also reported that they are paying closer attention to risk and mitigation strategies, acquisition planning, and have a better understanding of how work breakdown structures and earned value management contribute to the success of a project or program.

The training consists of four course segments in program/project

management, acquisition management, business management for government applications, and leadership and interpersonal skills, and includes action planning. At the conclusion of the training, participants take a certification exam known as the Capstone to evaluate and validate a student's skills.

"We've received a lot of feedback that participants find the action planning very useful," said Garrison. "It's the 'involve me' part of the curriculum that helps them execute their ideas."

As a result of the training, some 50 percent of participants have identified opportunities for improving project management processes, and approximately 75 percent are rapidly improving VA processes, procedures and artifacts within one to three months of the training investment.

"We are making a meaningful difference improving how our programs are managed," Garrison added.

Acquisition Internship School

Created to grow the next generation of acquisition professionals, the Acquisition Internship School uses a holistic approach to develop trusted business advisors capable of exercising sound business judgment to achieve best value solutions. The rigorous curriculum is grounded in the Federal Acquisition Regulation Guiding Principles and incorporates program management, communication, leadership, interpersonal, risk management and innovating thinking 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. The curriculum evolves from basic to more complex acquisition strategies during the course of the internship and is designed to accelerate the learning curve and reduce time to performance.

The training is improving the acquisition bandwidth, creating an im-

mediate impact for the agency. "During fiscal year 2010, our interns supported more than 1,000 VA contracts with a total value of approximately \$5.4 billion," said Joanne Choy, acting vice chancellor for the Internship School.

"Contracting offices across the country are taking note of the increased productivity," said Choy. "The number of job-hosting organizations within VA has increased to 47 from one at the start of the program. That's because interns are demonstrating their competence and adding bench strength during their rotations."

Elizabeth Youse, network contract manager for the VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5), and Richard Edens, acquisition service chief for the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System, couldn't agree more after hosting VAAA interns.

"The interns made an immediate impact," said Youse. "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 their training is VA-oriented. It's also helpful that they come in with knowledge of the electronic Contract Management System (eCMS)—a skill they need to have."

Youse has hosted three rotations of interns and is preparing to host again. "If I had to say anything it would be to encourage my fellow network contract managers to host and place the interns."

Edens said simply, "I am your biggest fan." Central Arkansas has hosted six interns during three job rotations and, like Youse, is preparing to host again.

"The interns come with a strong, rounded technical and interpersonal skill set," he said. "They understand contracting, know the terminology, have training in eCMS, and know online tools like FedBizOps. They make an immediate impact and act as force multipliers.

"One intern worked on one of the first medical liquid bulk oxygen contracts in the nation. In fact, we had other contracting offices asking for a copy of their solicitation."

Other interns wrote the requirement for the Voice of the VA survey for a national program office, developed a \$2.5 million Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity construction contract, and worked on the procurement for a modular building for the Law Enforcement Training Center, which enhanced their capability to provide training to VA's police force.

"We have a demanding workload," said Edens. "Many of these projects were high-visibility projects with national exposure. You can't build [interns] fast enough for me."

Contracting Professional School

The Contracting Professional School trains and certifies VA's existing acquisition workforce to achieve and maintain required Office of Management and Budget certifications and to close proficiency gaps. The school trained 3,335 students from September 2008, when it opened, through the end of October 2010, with an average course rating of 4.2 out of 5.0.

"We wanted to infuse VA examples into our curriculum to increase relevance," said Doyle. "Over the past year, we have worked with our training vendors to add civilian equivalent case studies and examples in our training.

"The examples create a theory-to-practice connection for our students. In addition, we began conducting in-class instructor evaluations and developed a standardized student evaluation tool to make sure our training is the best that it can be.

"It takes a highly trained acquisition workforce to effectively award and manage contracts to execute our critical missions," added Doyle.

The VA Acquisition Academy is making a meaningful difference within VA by changing behavior and improving performance. 