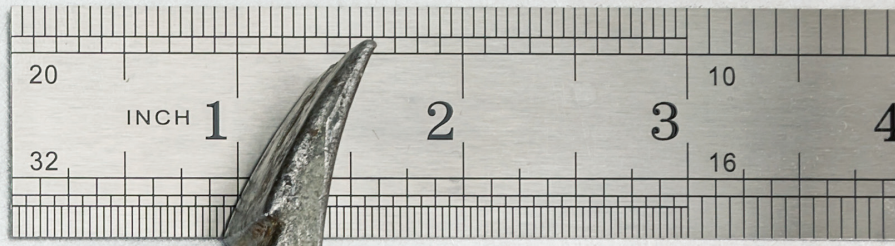




CONTRACT MANAGEMENT



THE CONTRACTING TOOLS ISSUE



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CONTRACTING TOOLS OF THE FUTURE

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THE RIGHT TOOLS = BOTTOM-LINE SAVINGS

APR 17



“Veterans Are Our ‘True North’”

Executive Interview—

Ruby Harvey

Chancellor, VA Acquisition Academy

Contract Management

PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF.

Ruby Harvey

I serve as the chancellor of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Acquisition Academy (VAAA),¹ where I direct and oversee the training of VA's acquisition workforce. As chancellor, I formulate and deliver the strategies needed to develop acquisition business advisors to effectively and efficiently buy and manage the goods and services required to serve our nation's Veterans.

I have more than 20 years of acquisition, program management, finance, and human resources experience in the public and private sectors, and I am responsible for training the VA acquisition workforce by instilling essential competencies and skills and establishing career development programs. I oversee the Acquisition Internship School,² Program Management School,³ Contract-

ing Professional School,⁴ Facilities Management School,⁵ Supply Chain Management School,⁶ and an Enterprise Shared Services Department.

CM

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THE VAAA?

RH

Our mission is to be the career development academy of choice that prepares, enables, and inspires higher performing acquisition professionals and organizations for better mission results. The VAAA was established in 2008 to train VA's acquisition workforce. Acquisition is a mission-critical function that is integral to the execution of all federal agency programs. It takes a highly trained workforce to award and manage contracts for cost, schedule, and performance. When done well, it results in best-value solutions for the taxpayer and our nation's Veterans.

CM
 HOW HAS VAAA BEEN AFFECTED BY THE CURRENT BUDGET SCENARIO?

RH
 We are always mindful of our fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayer and the Veteran and are thoughtful in developing our approaches to training. We have a diverse and decentralized workforce in VA and understand that time and budget are precious commodities. Therefore, we are continuing to expand our virtual learning offerings when possible to minimize time away from the office and eliminate the need for travel.

VAAA's training for contracting officer representatives (CORs) is a great virtual training success story. CORs perform critical functions in federal acquisitions:

- They ensure contractors meet the commitment of their contracts,
- They oversee the proper development of requirements, and
- They assist contracting officers in managing contracts.

The role of the COR can often be an ancillary responsibility; therefore, new CORs are continuously being selected and trained. There are more than 10,000 CORs in VA.

Given the need to reduce travel spending and time away from work, we recognized the need and opportunity to increase our FAC-COR offerings and to do so in a cost-effective manner that caused minimal disruption to employee productivity. In response, in fiscal year 2013, we launched the first virtual delivery course to train CORs for FAC-COR Level II. The course:

- Replicates face-to-face instruction in a virtual environment,
- Produces cost savings by eliminating the need for travel,
- Is "green" through a paperless training environment, and
- Results in higher productivity because students spend less time away from the office.

VAAA offers this training opportunity to all government employees.

In fiscal year 2016, we delivered more than 1,016 seats of virtual FAC-COR training with an average score of 4.83 out of 5.0. This virtual training provided federal employees with the training they needed to perform their mission-critical roles, all while saving an estimated \$1.6 million in travel costs in fiscal year 2016 alone.

Building on that success, we launched a new governmentwide, web-based FAC-COR Level I course in October. By the end of the

year, we had already trained 615 students with positive feedback, providing an estimated \$27,400 in training cost savings.

In addition, our Contracting Professional School (CPS) increased the number of blended or virtual instructor-led offerings to 70 in fiscal year 2016. With our expanded use of technology to deliver virtual training, students earned over 13,000 continuous learning points (CLPs) in virtual instructor-led training with zero hours of travel time. This saved a great deal in travel costs, and employees spent less time away from the office without sacrificing quality in instruction.

We consistently receive high marks for our virtual learning, whether it's webinar-based, self-paced, or live instructor-led. We continue to explore options to expand our offerings by leveraging technology to enable us to reach more students, reduce the burden of time away from the office, and provide substantial cost savings to the government.

CM
 YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU USE METRICS TO MEASURE THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE TRAINING VAAA DELIVERS, BUT HOW DOES VAAA ENGAGE WITH ITS STAKEHOLDERS AND KNOW HOW WELL IT IS PERFORMING? HOW DO YOU GAUGE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION?

RH
 VAAA has a robust stakeholder engagement strategy. In addition to relying on substantial in-house expertise, we rely heavily on input from the workforce to shape our learning interventions. We listen to our customers, both through our formal and informal idea exchanges with our stakeholders, and respond to customers' needs in rapidly changing, mission-critical areas. We work not only with our internal senior leaders to gather this information, but also with external experts and those who work in the field to ensure we understand the current acquisition environment and can provide best-in-class training solutions.

With in-house subject matter experts and instructional designers, we can also respond rapidly to stakeholder needs. An example of that would be the efforts of the CPS and Program Management School (PMS) last year following a Supreme Court ruling on Veterans First Contracting.⁷ CPS responded rapidly, training more than 2,100 students in Veterans First Contracting over a period of seven days through 14 webinars, earning an average student satisfaction rating of 4.6 out of 5. Immediately following, PMS delivered virtual



*"To care for him who shall
have borne the battle, and for
his widow, and his orphan"*
A. Lincoln



"Market Research and Veterans First Contracting" webinars to more than 1,000 VA program managers and CORs.

An example of senior leader engagement is our "Learning Solutions Forum" (LSF), a cross-cutting, customer-facing, advisory body established to ensure our offerings and learning solutions reflect the most vital pressures, challenges, and priorities faced by our acquisition workforce. This group develops an "Annual Learning Solutions Plan" (ALSP) that is reported to senior leadership to inform them on VAAA's training programs, strategies, and annual offerings. Each ALSP is developed utilizing feedback from VAAA stakeholders as well as data collected from sources such as the acquisition human capital management office.

Recognizing that not all learning happens in designed interventions, another important process to identify learning needs is monitoring student feedback systems to identify gaps that may exist in workplace performance expectations from stakeholder groups participating in academy training. We then leverage this feedback in the annual course and curriculum development sessions.

Ultimately, we serve as a business partner to assist stakeholder organizations by designing learning interventions to address business needs based upon our collective stakeholder input.

CM

ARE THERE ANY CULTURAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, POLICY, AND/OR WORKFORCE INITIATIVES IN YOUR ORGANIZATION THAT IMPACT YOUR MISSION?

RH

The VA is currently undergoing a historic transformation initiative to enhance the Veteran experience. Called "MyVA,"⁸ this initiative is changing the way we do business by putting Veterans at the center of everything we do. I am proud to say the academy serves a key role in that initiative.

In fiscal year 2016, VAAA became the business owner of "VA 101" training. The training, created for employees by employees, is designed to create a common level of knowledge of all the services and benefits VA offers and to increase knowledge of military culture to enhance the Veteran experience. Then VA Secretary Bob McDonald set a goal to train 50 percent of VA employees (177,915) by the end of 2016. I am pleased to report that we surpassed that goal, training more than 202,000 VA employees.

It's a historic achievement accomplished through a train-the-trainer program. Under VAAA's leadership, the VA 101 team trained and

certified more than 1,400 ambassadors and provided them the tools to deliver the training. Ambassadors then conducted local training events to train their employees. It has been a collaborative effort with VA facilities across the nation, and we are pleased to be a part of training that directly impacts Veterans.

Ultimately, Veterans are our “true north,” and we reinforce that every day. Our mission statement, “To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan,”⁹ is printed at the top of our entrance stairwell as a reminder to all who enter.

CM
TODAY’S PROCUREMENT WORKFORCE IS VERY CHALLENGED TO MEET THEIR MISSION IN THIS NEW ERA OF AUSTERITY. HOW ARE YOU HELPING THEM TO MANAGE THESE CHALLENGES?

RH
As I mentioned earlier, we are increasing our blended learning options for students, recognizing that time away from the office can

“**Training is critical** to mission success.”

Our intern programs build mission service into the curriculum so that they have an opportunity to interact directly with Veterans and see the mission firsthand, and we launched an innovative “Warriors to Workforce” (W2W) intern program creating federal careers in acquisition for our returning warriors. The W2W program hires, transitions, trains, and deploys Veterans with service-connected disabilities, preparing them for long-term professional federal careers as contract specialists. To date, six cohorts (121 participants) have completed the program.

Upon W2W program completion, interns matriculate to the “Acquisition Intern Program” (AIP) for 18 months of holistic and technical training, which includes the training required for the first two levels of the Federal Acquisition Certification in Contracting (FAC-C). To date, 222 participants have graduated from AIP and work in contracting offices around the country in VA as well as other government agencies, including the General Services Administration, National Institutes of Health, and Department of Defense. There are currently 38 interns in W2W and 104 interns in AIP.

be a real challenge for our hard-working acquisition workforce. We are also working to develop more cross-functional training opportunities. The acquisition function crosses business lines, so it’s helpful for those involved to train together and understand each other’s roles, which leads to more efficient and effective acquisition packages. Some of the new learning solutions for cross-functional training include:

- FAC-COR Level 1,
- “Critical Thinking for Acquisition Leaders,”
- “Critical Thinking for Individuals,”
- “Market Research and Veterans First Contracting,” and
- “General Awareness Veterans First Contracting.”

In addition, our chief acquisition officer, Greg Giddens,¹⁰ recently issued a VA-wide memorandum encouraging industry engagement,¹¹ and issued “Acquisition Guiding Principles”¹² that emphasize collaboration and rapid sourcing of requirements at affordable prices versus simply following sometimes overly strict interpretations of the acquisition regulations. We developed a course on market intelligence that covers engaging industry, we are infusing these principles in our curriculum, and we are socializing the principles among our student population.

CM

WORKFORCE TRAINING IS ONE OF THE KEY MISSION AREAS OF VAAA. HOW DO YOU REACT TO THE NOTION THAT TRAINING IS A KEY ISSUE?

RH

Training is critical to mission success. VA spent more than \$20 billion on goods and services in fiscal year 2016. With so much at stake, it is critical that the workforce is adequately trained to deliver best-value solutions and manage for cost, schedule, and performance.

VAAA represents a significant investment in workforce development in a mission-critical function.

CM

YOU'VE MENTIONED THE VARIOUS METHODS AND METRICS VAAA USES TO MEASURE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ITS TRAINING AND STAKEHOLDER SATISFACTION. WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP? HOW DOES VAAA UTILIZE THIS DATA TO IMPROVE ITS PROGRAMS, AND ARE THERE ANY OTHER SOURCES OF FEEDBACK THAT YOU MONITOR AS WELL?

RH

We monitor and receive feedback from a variety of sources:

- Student participation,
- Course/program completion,
- Stakeholder satisfaction/reaction, and
- Learner outcomes.

Additional measures of effectiveness include learning applications and business results, which are evaluated after training participants return to their places of work.

Through well-established stakeholder engagement approaches

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and a sound learning standards and evaluation framework, our offerings are developed, implemented, and evaluated to ensure they deliver results that improve the acquisition system. By working closely with stakeholders and engaging with senior leadership, VAAA aligns its learning solutions with practical, critical, business needs. For our evaluations, we developed questions from industry and use the “Kirkpatrick Model,”¹³ which goes deeper than the topical questions used by many.

Our evaluations ask questions that are used to truly measure the effectiveness of learning taking place at the academy. By asking opened-ended questions requiring the student to write in a response, we are able to capture student views and feelings as they apply to not only the course curriculum, but also to measure the effectiveness of the instructors who teach the courses.

We also elicit supervisor feedback to understand how the academy’s training is impacting VA’s business, and we review operational data points to understand its impact in serving the enterprise, including:

- Total training hours delivered,
- Total classes delivered, and
- Total enrollment.

VAAA training maintains an average of 4.6 out of 5 customer satisfaction survey rating. In addition, we are leading the way in training aligned with the Federal Buildings Personnel Training Act¹⁴ to ensure a qualified facilities management workforce. We also provide added bench strength and immediate impact through our intern programs.



ACQUISITION ACADEMY

CM
WHAT KINDS OF TECHNIQUES DOES VAAA USE TO DELIVER THIS TRAINING (ONLINE, CLASSROOM-BASED, ETC.)?

RH
We leverage multiple instructional technologies to create learning strategies and blended approaches that combine the engaging benefits of traditional instructor-led training with technology. Our learning strategies include:

Computer-based training—We utilize this training in a blended environment, so that it is reinforced with student-student and student-instructor interactions.

Simulation activities—The students become participants, not just listeners or observers. They take on hands-on roles, find ways to succeed, and develop problem-solving skills.

Self-paced independent study—We supplement classroom training with self-paced learning like pre-work reading, homework assignments, and activities.

On-the-job training—We utilize on-the-job training and evaluate how well knowledge is applied in the job setting.

Cohort group support—Cohort groups, like those used in our acquisition and project management intern programs, contribute to:

- Increased development of critical-thinking skills,
- A strong network of peers, and
- Increased motivation and changes in personal perspective.

Mentoring and coaching—In either a formal mentoring program or informal relationship, mentors focus on the person, his or her career, and support for individual growth and maturity. The coach is job-focused and performance-oriented.

We utilize virtual classrooms where instructors and students interact. Examples include:

- Presentations,
- Discussions,
- Chats,
- Blogs,
- Assignments,
- Cohort groups,
- Activities,
- Resource materials, and
- Job aids.

Virtual classrooms provide some of the same advantages of onsite classrooms with the added benefit of reducing travel costs.

CM
IN YOUR OPINION, HOW IMPORTANT IS RELEVANT EXPERIENCE, WHEN BALANCED AGAINST FORMAL TRAINING, IN DETERMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TODAY’S WORKFORCE?

RH
Proper training is critical to mission success, but there is no substitute for experience. We account for that by using a holistic, experiential training model that incorporates the following experience-related activities:

Skill-building activities—These give students a chance to apply what they have learned in a “safe-to-fail” environment where they learn from their mistakes.

On-the-job rotations—These give interns a chance to apply what they have learned doing real contracting work under the supervision of a senior-level contracting officer.

Real-world examples—These allow students to learn from real examples.

Mission service—This keeps students connected to the mission of serving veterans.

This model also incorporates communities of practice, which provide the following learning opportunities:

Knowledge-sharing—Where students can learn best practices.

Mentoring—Where students can get support from peers and colleagues.

Reach-back support—Where students can “reach back” to VAAA for support and assistance.

The cohort model—Creates a strong network of peers.

Our holistic training model is not a substitute for experience, but it enables our students to learn and grow while decreasing the time to competence.

CM
WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING?

RH

I enjoy spending time with my family, especially my new grandson. I also enjoy live theater and I am a budding writer of short stories. I am especially focused on helping to develop women leaders in public service.

CM

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS IN THE NEAR FUTURE FOR VAAA, AND WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE FOR YOUR LEGACY TO BE AFTER YOU'RE GONE?

RH

My vision for VAAA is that through training and education, we will help the workforce open doors. We will continue to conduct outreach activities with VA employees, industry, academia, and other government agencies. We will continue to expand online and blended offerings through the eCademy and develop innovative solutions through technology. We will continue to improve employee engagement and development to ensure a collaborative, competent, and innovative professional workforce, and

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will continue on the path of operational excellence by continuous improvement in business processes.

As far as a legacy, I want to continue to build upon the excellent foundation established by my predecessors while growing and adjusting to today's acquisition workforce challenges.

CM
PLEASE SHARE A FEW OF YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONALISM IN CONTRACTING, SUCH AS PURSUING OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES, ADVANCED LEARNING OR DEGREES, ETC.

RH
The academy is committed to the pursuit of lifelong learning and supports professional development activities for its employees. Employees are encouraged to participate in professional development conferences as both participants and presenters, and to pursue additional professional engagement and training within their career field. We strive for a balanced continuum of learning throughout a contracting professional's career to provide supporting training opportunities as he or she grows in terms of authority and responsibility.

CM
DO YOU SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES BECOMING INVOLVED AND TAKING ADVANTAGE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH NCMA OR OTHER SIMILAR ORGANIZATIONS (E.G., BECOMING AN NCMA CHAPTER VOLUNTEER, SPEAKING AT OR ATTENDING TRAINING FORUMS, WRITING ARTICLES FOR *CONTRACT MANAGEMENT* MAGAZINE, OR OBTAINING ADVANCED CERTIFICATIONS)?

RH
I am a strong proponent of continuous learning and we encourage employees to pursue additional credentialing and professional development. It sharpens their skill-sets and helps them to grow both personally and professionally. **CM**

EDITOR'S NOTES

1. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov.
2. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/schools/internship/ for more information.
3. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/schools/ppm/ for more information.
4. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/schools/contracting/ for more information.
5. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/schools/fm/ for more information.
6. See www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/schools/scm/ for more information.
7. The "Veterans First Contracting Program" was created by Pub. L. 109-461 to ensure that legitimate Veteran-owned small businesses (VOSBs) and service-disabled Veteran-owned small businesses (SDVOSBs) are able to compete for VA set-asides. It is notable for establishing the "Rule of Two" at the VA—that VA must ensure that there is not a reasonable expectation that two or more VOSBs/SDVOSBs will submit reasonable bids before it can place orders with other sources, such as orders under the Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) program. In *Kingdomware Technologies v. United States* (14-916, June 16, 2016), the Supreme Court ruled that abiding by the VA Rule of Two for FSS orders was mandatory, not discretionary.
8. For more information, visit <https://www.va.gov/myva/>.
9. The official VA motto is derived from a quote from President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address on March 4, 1865. Delivered during the final days of the American Civil War, Lincoln's address focused on how to recover as a nation once the war reached its conclusion. The full quote reads: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." (See <https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/vamotto.pdf>.)
10. See "Procuring For Our Nation's Veterans: Executive Interview—Greg Giddens, VA's Acting Acquisition Chief," *Contract Management Magazine* (July 2016) for our previous discussion with Mr. Giddens.
11. Available at www.va.gov/oalc/docs/memoEncouragingIndustryEngagement20151222.pdf.
12. Available at www.va.gov/oalc/docs/memoVAacquisitionPrinciples20151222.pdf.
13. A training evaluation standard that uses a four-level model to gauge the effectiveness of a training program, beginning with the initial reaction of participants after the training and ending with the ultimate end benefits brought forth by such attendance and participation. (See, generally, www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/OurPhilosophy/TheKirkpatrickModel for more information.)
14. Pub. L. 111-308. (Requires all federal personnel who perform building operations and maintenance services to demonstrate their competency in their areas of performance.)

“My **vision** for VAAA is that through training and education, we will help the workforce **open doors**.”
