

Introduction

It's coming, we all know it, we've all talked about it at length—a train wreck is about to happen because more than 50 percent of DOD's Acquisition Workforce becomes eligible for retirement in the next 5 to 10 years. The Army acquisition community is not just talking, it's doing something about the problem this year—testing a U.S. Army Materiel Command (AMC)/Army Acquisition Corps (AAC) pre-intern program—the Acquisition Career Experience (ACE) Program.

ACE is a 2-year program in which college students enrolled in integrated science and technology and business degree programs work in Army acquisition organizations for the last two summers of their undergraduate studies. The students learn about the issues and challenges faced by the Army's acquisition community and offer their ideas in a working environment. The intent of this program is to build the relationships necessary to encourage successful ACE students to opt for a government service career by becoming interns in one of the acquisition career fields after graduation from college.

Background

The idea for the ACE Program began in 1998 with an initiative called the Contracting XXI Blueprint. This effort was led by senior members of the AMC contracting community, who examined issues that would affect the future of contracting and the entire acquisition community. Blueprint developers throughout the command identified a number of business areas needing improvement for the future success of Army contracting. One of the most critical areas identified was workforce revitalization.

Representatives from HQ AMC in Alexandria, VA, and the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM) Acquisition Center Army Acquisition Workforce Development Group in Fort Monmouth, NJ, developed a program outline that incorporated the Blueprint developers' consensus that the future acquisition professional will need to assume a broader integrating role. Because of this, the program outline reflects an innovative educational approach combining business and the sciences into one degree program. A chance discovery identified a university that had recently worked with industry to develop a new, multifunctional degree program that very nicely paralleled future educational needs outlined in the ACE Program. That university is James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, VA.

The largest hurdle facing the program was finding a sponsor with seed money to

THE ACQUISITION CAREER EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Sallie Flavin and Emily Clarke

test the concept. Finally, in late 1999, this problem was solved when Emily Clarke, AMC Procurement Analyst; Melinda M. Darby, AMC Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel; and Sallie Flavin, AMC Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Research, Development and Acquisition—Acquisition, Contracting and Program Management presented the idea to then Army Deputy Director for Acquisition Career Management (DDACM) Keith Charles.

The Acquisition Career Management Office (ACMO) agreed to support a pilot ACE program, but with a broader application to all acquisition areas. Since that time, the ACMO has played a significant role in locating and developing target positions for the students as well as handling other important implementation details. In February 2000, a formal partnership was established between AMC and the ACMO to conduct a pilot ACE Program. Participants included the DDACM; the AMC Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel and the AMC Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Research, Development and Acquisition—Acquisition, Contracting and Program Management, both at HQ AMC; and the CECOM Acquisition Center.

Key Program Elements

ACE is a 2-year summer program that provides students an opportunity to work in Army acquisition organizations. During this period, they will rotate between acquisition organizations at least once to receive the broadest possible perspective.

Students will be assigned a government mentor and a university faculty advisor. The government mentor will ensure the student is provided meaningful assignments and will introduce the student to the AAC.

Many aspects of the new degree program at JMU are especially appealing in the ACE context. The program is called the Integrated Science and Technology (ISAT) Program. It is designed to provide a broad-based understanding of business, science, and technology using the computer as a problem-solving tool. Students learn to solve problems in a "real-world" context, using a collaborative approach, and they are taught to be sensitive to political, social, and ethical issues. As an added benefit, the JMU faculty welcomes

the pilot program as an opportunity for students to get hands-on experience.

Students majoring in the JMU ISAT Program must do a senior thesis on a real-world problem to graduate. Participating acquisition organizations should provide students many opportunities to find a thesis subject that will challenge them and at the same time provide the Army with a useful assessment or solution.

Those students who successfully complete their educational program and receive favorable ACE evaluations will be offered an opportunity to enter directly into one of the acquisition intern programs or another similar program like the AMC Fellows Program.

During the pilot test period, the ACE Program will focus on the students in the multidisciplinary ISAT Program and business disciplines at JMU. The first students will be placed at host sites in the National Capital Region and the Fort Monmouth, NJ, area. The program will be expanded and refined as program administrators gain experience; the base of universities will be broadened as other schools with innovative programs are identified; and additional host sites at other acquisition organizations will be used.

Conclusion

Army acquisition leaders identified multifunctional education, training, and experience as desirable qualities for acquisition leaders of the 21st century. The ACE Program is a positive step toward solving this urgent need. Hopefully, ACE participants will find challenges and rewards in this program that will encourage them to stay with the Army in an intern program—and beyond—to become the Army's future acquisition leaders.

For further information on this program, visit the Web site at <http://www.monmouth.army.mil/cecom/ac/train/aac.html>.

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