

# NEED FINDS OPPORTUNITY

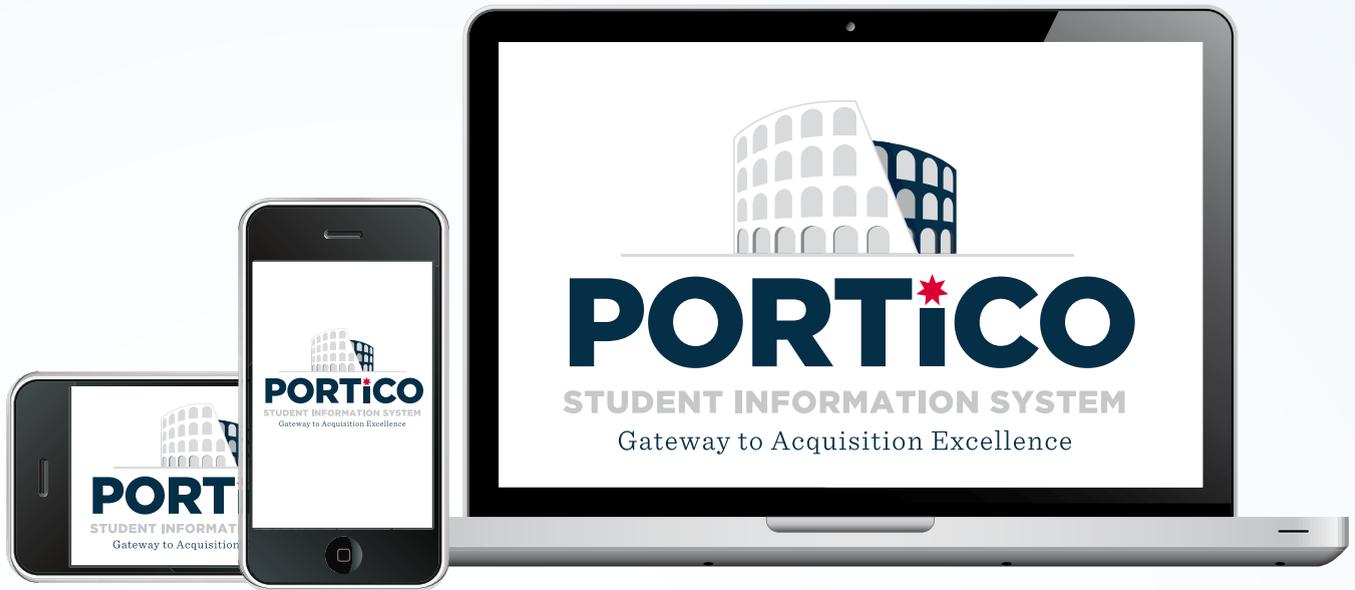


21st Century COTS Solution Promises to Improve the Student Experience and Address a Strategic Need

*Ron Vassallo*

Last year, at the completion of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit of DoD's acquisition workforce training titled "Defense Acquisition Workforce: DoD's Training Program Effective But Improvement is Needed" (GAO Report No. GAO-11-22), the GAO made two overarching recommendations to congressional oversight committees. In brief, these recommendations were:

- DoD must demonstrate and track how training efforts contribute to improved acquisition workforce performance.
- To improve DoD's ability to identify acquisition training needs for planning and front-end analysis, the department needs to acquire and implement an enterprise-wide, integrated Student Information System (SIS).



To the average member of the Defense Acquisition Workforce, GAO's recommendations likely went unnoticed. If noticed by enquiring minds, the reference to this 21st century commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) technology was as clear as an economic briefing by Alan Greenspan—before the first morning coffee. The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) and the Defense Acquisition Career Managers (DACMs) hope this current reality changes as the SIS becomes both familiar and essential to the entire acquisition community.

GAO's report focused on the strategic necessity of the SIS, noting,

...DAU faces challenges with the management and forecasting of training demand data...which hinders its ability to accurately facilitate getting the required training to acquisition workforce members in an efficient and cost-effective manner...[Consequently,] DAU has identified the need for an integrated student information system to improve the quality of the data and to provide greater insight into the workforce it supports.

While improved forecasting represents a key value proposition, over the last decade SIS technology has had a far greater impact on the management of leading higher education institutions. SIS technology, best thought of as an enterprise resource planning tool for the higher education community, fuses administrative and academic functions. As Mark Whiteside, the director of performance and resource management and executive program director for the PORTiCO initiative, often cites, "Our decision to adopt SIS technology

is all about applying the power of 21st century technology to the purpose of improving acquisition outcomes." In other words, PORTiCO will make it easier for students, DACMs, DAU staff, and faculty to manage data and decisions through secure, 24x7, online access to the information they need. Students will search and register for classes by requirement or date, and will retrieve certification audits. Faculty will easily manage course information, rosters, and grading, as well as communicate with students. All of this activity will occur on one, simple interface.

### **Benefits Realization for the Acquisition Workforce**

Leading universities and community colleges in the United States and around the globe have adopted SIS technology to improve the student experience and to foster more agile, integrated, and productive enterprises. Although we have a very different community, our aim is the same: continuously improve career training for the Defense Acquisition Workforce.

For everyone with a stake in the training of the Defense Acquisition Workforce, PORTiCO has the potential to transform workforce preparedness through the adoption of global best practices. This adoption of standardized and validated processes is the fundamental and compelling value of a COTS solution. While no technology is a panacea, benefitting from the collective wisdom of global higher education practices in key areas such as registration, schedule development and management, course catalog, student profiles, career management, student services, communications, and reporting—

to name a few—promises to prepare DAU and the workforce for 21st century challenges.

### So How Will PORTiCO Transform Workforce Training and Readiness?

**PORTiCO will integrate.** For the past two decades, DAU and the DACMs have invested time and resources toward the development of the current systems managing the registration and reporting processes. Nevertheless, this custom solution development has fostered increasing fragmentation of systems and data repositories. Out of the current patchwork of resources, PORTiCO will integrate all of the critical processes, technology, and strategies (including acquisition training data, assets, and career development resources) into one accessible gateway. This single destination will serve as the central community resource that will enable the workforce, DAU, and the DACMs to achieve both individual professional goals and the strategic objectives of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA). We anticipate the new enterprise system will build on the foundation and legacy of past innovation.

**PORTiCO will simplify.** Instead of continuing to invest in increasingly complex and cobbled proprietary systems, the SIS will help simplify and standardize our processes by adopting commercial best practices.

**PORTiCO will instill transparency.** The increased transparency manifests itself in the form of access to real-time re-



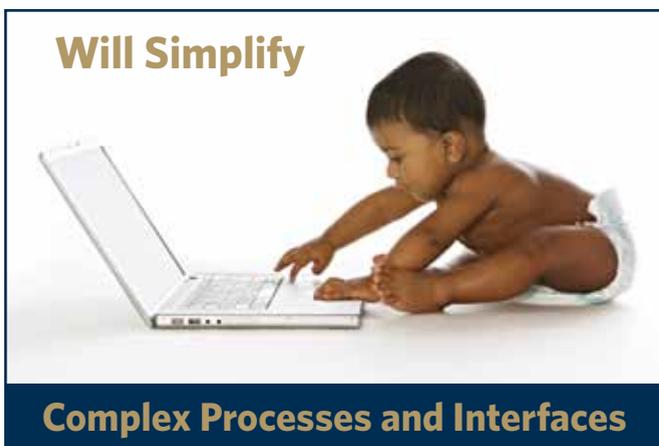
lowers the risk of adoption and creates an opportunity for the absorption of global best practices. The timing could not be better given the growing demands to produce more training and more career guidance with fewer resources.

### Using the Mobile Industry Experience

The introduction of the SIS is reminiscent of another industry's evolution. The mobile (or cellular) phone industry began with the promise to untether society: a straightforward objective with powerful implications. If we could travel back in time, we would notice some strong similarities between the first mobile phone introduced by Dr. Martin Cooper of Motorola (1973) and the development of information systems in support of acquisition training. This breakthrough technology—weighing in at 4.5 lbs. without its fashionable carrying case—was “boxy but good.” This phrase would aptly characterize our early acquisition training systems.

The mobile industry pushed on and continued to drive design toward increasingly feature-rich and complex handsets—feature-rich but less functional. Then came the iPhone. Function finally met form. It was the simplicity of the iPhone user experience that realized something we will call FUMIFU—First Use Must Inspire Future Use—making the user experience so simple and compelling that the users embrace the technology and use it to drive unanticipated innovation.

The history of the mobile phone closely mirrors the evolution of our acquisition training systems. We have developed increasingly complex and customized processes enabled by systems that have been developed through layers of coding. These layers have become less integrated and more challenging to navigate for users and system administrators. Over several decades, these legacy systems have made an extraordinary contribution to managing acquisition training, but their ability to provide 21st century support for the workforce is waning. PORTiCO is a response to this need. This new technology will deliver the capabilities to redefine training processes and drive innovation. The PORTiCO initiative's objective is nothing less than FUMIFU. The entire workforce will determine the rest.



porting, audit trails for strong accountability, and visibility to activity and outcomes throughout the entire workforce. This broader visibility will engender a better user experience for students and, as noted in the GAO findings, more actionable business intelligence for the Pentagon.

### Good Idea, But Why Now?

Need Finds Opportunity. Or in other words, the commercial technology has come of age just as the urgency for better solutions has peaked at the DoD. What was once a cutting-edge technology for pioneering higher education institutions has become a mature, state-of-the-art solution with a track record of impact. The maturation of these enterprise systems

## How Will the Workforce Benefit?

To get specific about how the workforce will benefit, let's begin with students. While many students may be satisfied with their current training and career tools, a recent survey of recent graduates captured direct feedback on what could be done to make the registration experience better. The SIS will provide students with a personalized training and career toolkit. Students will organize their experience according to their preferences and professional goals. We'll also enable them to peruse the course catalog, register for courses, understand certification requirements, download pre-course work, and communicate with faculty all through one simple interface. If a student needs guidance or has a question on waitlist policy, the student can access a quick self-help guide. If it's time for a change, then this future platform will serve as guide to keep the student ahead of the game. Select a career path and the SIS will generate a training scenario with the list of remaining courses and requirements. No confusing steps, no dead ends, and always open for business.

It's also a great resource for faculty to stay connected. Much like students, faculty will enjoy a simple user experience personalized to meet their specific objectives. With the ability to communicate with individual students or groups of students, the SIS will provide robust communication options—also delivering the ability to flexibly communicate when they want. Moreover, access to comprehensive student profiles, outlining courses taken, academic history, and work experience, will also let faculty know a little more about their students.

The sheer usefulness of the SIS outweighs even its premier communications capabilities. With new classroom management capabilities and seamless integration with ATLAS Pro and Blackboard, the SIS will eliminate the paperwork and establish one destination for every critical task associated with managing the classroom, from class rosters to student grading.

For DAU staff members in the trenches—academic deans, ed techs, regional staff, schedule management, and student services—the SIS will gather a powerful set of resources to get their jobs done efficiently and without kluge workarounds. For these roles, the SIS means nothing less than a sea change—one that will have a dramatic effect on productivity while promising to keep more hairs on your head.

This change means that daily tasks are less frustrating. No longer do users need to access multiple systems to achieve a single task. Using single sign-on technology, users will not need to write multiple passwords on their hands. Paper audit trails for thousands of schedule changes become automated along with the communications alerting students and faculty of the change. With real-time access to enterprise-wide activity, we'll also get better at demand forecasting, thereby driving down the number of changes that need to occur.

For component DACMs, the benefits are equally compelling. The SIS isn't starting from scratch. Rather, the SIS will benefit

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from a foundation of investments, process re-engineering, technology development, and many lessons learned by the DACMs over the last decade. The SIS represents the next natural step in this progression.

The SIS will support DACMs in their primary mission of helping the Defense Acquisition Workforce manage their professional acquisition careers. The SIS will provide access to comprehensive DAWIA student records, real-time reporting, and the ability to customize workflow for their specific constituency. Access to real-time workforce activity from filled seats to certification rates will also deliver the kind of business intelligence required to make agile decisions about resources. This new visibility will also empower DACMs to view DoD enterprise-wide activity and to work in a coordinated fashion to achieve DAWIA objectives.

Senior defense leadership as well as Congress will acquire the same insight empowering DACMs to make agile decisions, and this data will serve as a catalyst for action. The enterprise-wide visibility, new efficiencies, and adoption of commercial best practices promise real strategic advantage in workforce preparedness and DoD's ability to steward its acquisition resources.

## Final Thoughts

The intent is to field the Student Information System in 2012 in time for the 2013 registration cycle. Its success will depend on a collaborative effort by all acquisition workforce stakeholders to embrace the opportunity to adopt best practices and an integration effort that will improve enterprise productivity. GAO has cited some of the system's strategic value but, as presented in this article, the SIS promises substantial value for every constituent member in the acquisition workforce. This breakthrough opportunity will introduce challenges, but the arrival of SIS and its accompanying benefits will make the prize well worth the journey.

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