INTERVIEW

DAU President Katrina McFarland

Under Secretary of Defense Dr. Ashton Carter's September 2010 memorandum on Better Buying Power has given the Defense Acquisition Workforce a new challenge in making the most of taxpayer dollars. In an interview with *Defense AT&L*, DAU President Katrina McFarland discussed what this means for DAU and for everyone involved in buying products and services for the Department of Defense.

Defense AT&L: Could you help our readers understand the context for Dr. Carter's Better Buying Power initiative?

McFarland: Dr. Carter observed when he came on board that we weren't as productive as we could be. Items were costing more, not less, over time—whereas in the commercial world, prices decrease over time.

In addition, since 9/11, the Defense Acquisition Workforce had been focused on rapid procurement rather than long-term. Dr. Carter wanted to have the tools we had set aside revisited, because the business processes we'd been using quite appropriately to achieve rapid acquisition were not geared toward better business deals. In short, he wanted a better business deal for DoD.

Defense AT&L: Is there a general principle to how can we make better business deals?

McFarland: Better business deals tend to take more time. They need to have a prepared government buyer who's knowledgeable about the product and how they'll be working with industry.

So in May of last year, Dr. Carter began formulating this Better Buying Power initiative. His focus: How do we increase the buying power of the AT&L workforce, with more productivity and reduced bureaucracy? To explore those questions, he recruited the people actually involved in purchasing and contracting on behalf of DoD.

The team looked into the skills and authorities that we have to find the "long-ball hitters"—the best opportunities for improvement. From a list of more than 100 areas, they narrowed it down to the 23 in the final memo.

Defense AT&L: What difficulties have there been?

McFarland: One of the biggest impacts has been what Dr. Carter calls the "anti-efficiency activity," the Continuing Resolution Authority [CRA]. He released the memo in September 2010, and immediately thereafter came the CRA, which prevented the implementation from being as effective as it needed to be. Although we didn't have a solid start, we have had successes, such as the ground combat vehicle and the Ohio Class submarine. I think we'll have even more successes now that we aren't under a CRA that prohibits some activities.

Government really has a different driving force from what industry has; government has a responsibility to the public to protect the interest of the taxpayers. But the business partner's responsibility is to its shareholders.

Defense AT&L: Some months back, the acquisition community also received a set of initiatives from then-Secretary Gates, calling for $100 billion in savings over the next 5 years, while accommodating incremental but steady growth. How is this different from the Better Buying Power initiative, and where do these two initiatives intersect?

McFarland: When Secretary Gates began his initiative, there was confusion among some folks. Dr. Carter made it clear that his initiatives were to provide tools to give people a better understanding of business deals, with improving efficiency and productivity in mind. He had no dollar amount goal. Secretary Gates' initiative set a goal but did not come with a toolkit for achieving that goal. So Dr. Carter's initiative intersects nicely with that.

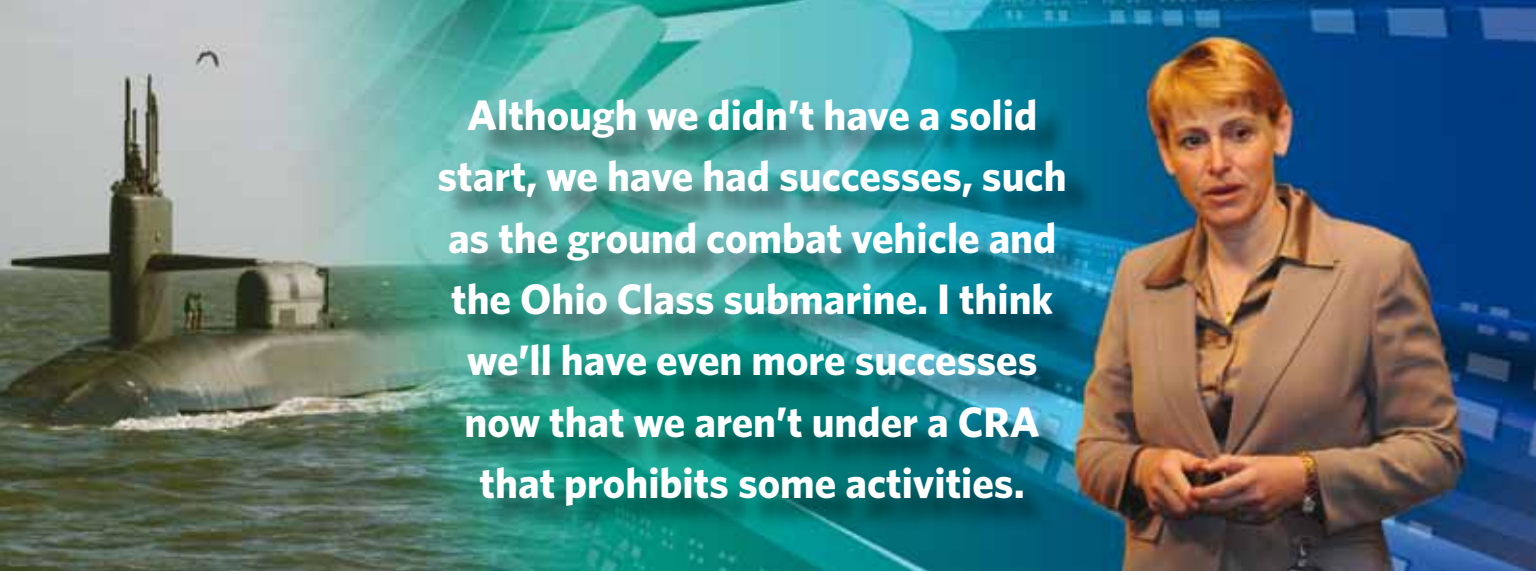
Defense AT&L: Do you think it's fair to say that the BBP initiative is more of a long-term focus?

McFarland: Yes. And that fits with the role of this university. In order to have long-term, institutional change, to ensure a principle is adopted by the larger workforce, the schoolhouse is a natural fit. And having a change in how we understand business and prepare ourselves for a business deal is a natural fit for DAU. So my role will be to help facilitate, integrate, and institutionalize these tools into our business practices and in how we train people.

Defense AT&L: What do you think DAU can do to give the workforce the tools to maximize buying power?

McFarland: The country needs a decisive capability, and it needs to be able to afford it. And that's based on value—not cheapness. And the value has to have a life cycle in mind. To do that, you have to understand how business operates. Government really has a different driving force from what industry has; government has a responsibility to the public to protect the interest of the taxpayers. But the business partner's responsibility is to its shareholders. We have to have a common understanding of how we both achieve the best outcome. So one of our challenges is to communicate with industry from a shared perspective.

One focus of DAU will be to help students to be confident in their ability to deal with industry at any point in the acquisition process. Our government people have become in-



U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Kimberly Clifford

sular, because our focus since 9/11—and rightfully so—has been timely, fast, rapid get-it-out-there-quickly support to the troops. But in the current economic reality, we need to protect the interests of contingency support but advance ourselves to create better buying power where we can.

Defense AT&L: How do you see training at DAU changing to reflect this?

McFarland: I don't have an academic background. I'm a professional engineer and an acquisition executive. I first had to understand the university and how it works. I'm blessed to have some very talented and experienced staff and faculty who have helped me with this. And among faculty, staff, and customers I spoke with, there was a great deal of commonality in what everyone saw as the opportunities for how we can improve the university and take the workforce into the future.

This relates to the assignment of the Human Capital Initiatives position to be a standalone rather than combined with the University presidency, because the president has lot of work to do, and so does the whole element of HCI. In the department, we really need to focus on those. And given the volume of things to do and the need, it was a good thing to stand up the new HCI and select Keith Charles to lead it.

Between the university's next transformation and the needed transformation of human capital management, the two pieces should come together to improve our outcomes for acquisition professionals.

Defense AT&L: Could you talk a little more about that transformation?

McFarland: The university has got some of the highest accolades from commercial and academic institutions around the world. I'm surrounded by medals and awards. Yet we've gotten to the point where we need to ask: What can we do to improve? It's evident we need to improve how career management is conducted and how we train our people, both in the teaching side as well as the teaching methodology. So there's a great opportunity for the workforce to not just certify people, but people have to *qualify* in their jobs—to *demonstrate* their ability to perform what they've been taught. And this will give them more confidence in doing business.

What's occurring right now is as though your son or daughter who just turned 15 takes and passes the driving test, and then you throw keys at them before they've ever been behind the wheel in real traffic. Not quite what we want. We want to sit with them and help them learn how to drive by mentoring and coaching them. So the training at DAU needs to evolve past formal classroom training. And some of our case analysis has already migrated toward that. The next step is to do it on the job.

Another important part is career management: ensuring that the people coming here to get qualified have met the prerequisites for that—that they're at the right place, at the right time, for the right reason.

Defense AT&L: What general advice do you have for new acquisitions professionals?

McFarland: The most that you can think about in terms of one's future is: Your career is not a race to the finish line. This is a journey. If you think about the trades: You start as an apprentice and then become a journeyman and ultimately a master. Getting to the next level is not based on how much time you spend but by your mastery of specific tasks. You yourself will become more confident by having done it, and both good and bad experiences contribute to that. My advice is not to try to race to a management position, because one thing experience brings is that confidence.

So engage in doing. Find people who will mentor you. Take the learning you get in the classroom, and then go and participate in as many diverse opportunities as you can. Expand your view beyond your local program office or business office, and reach out to expose yourself to the business of acquisition. It takes time.