

Contracting Workforce Development

How Warner Robins Air Logistics Center is Shaping its Future

Patsy J. Reeves, Former Contracting Director, Warner Robins Air Logistics Center

Contracting, like many other acquisition career fields, faces many challenges today. The workload has skyrocketed over the last decade because of expanding Department of Defense requirements for supplies and services. Also, contracting laws and regulations have become increasingly complex. At the same time, DoD budget challenges have downsized the acquisition workforce, and many seasoned contracting professionals are nearing retirement. This confluence of multiple workplace challenges

demands innovative strategies to recruit and train the next generation. Patsy Reeves, then contracting director at Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, talked to *Defense AT&L* in March 2008 about ways the center is addressing these challenges.

Q Can you describe how contracting teams support the Warner Robins mission? What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the last few years?

A During fiscal year 2007, the 350 contracting professionals at Robins Air Force Base awarded 14,454 contract actions worth \$4.7 billion. These contracts support the C-17, C-5, C-130, F-15, U-2, Joint Stars, and special operations forces

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Photos by Gary Cutrell, Robins AFB



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aircraft. We also purchased avionics, electronic warfare, test equipment, armament and support equipment systems, supply chain parts, and services. In addition to the current workload, last September, the secretary of the Air Force announced plans to regionalize operational contracting. Over the next two years, Warner Robins will become the hub for consolidated purchasing for 11 Air Force bases in the southeast United States. This new mission will add an additional 350 military and civilian contracting employees at Robins Air Force Base.

Over the last five years, our contracting organization has faced a twofold challenge—annual contract obligations have significantly increased while our workforce has decreased by 20 percent. To succeed in the face of these challenges, it has been essential to find smarter business approaches to get the job done and, at the same time, devise new ways to recruit and grow future contracting leaders.

Q *The Baby Boomer generation employees are retiring, and new Robins Air Force Base mission demands require additional workforce members. How are you preparing for the influx of inexperienced workers who will enter the contracting workforce?*

A Because contracting officers are entrusted to wisely spend millions of taxpayer dollars, the law requires them to have an undergraduate college degree, 24 hours of business academic courses, and 10 specialized DoD contracting training classes. Historically, it has also required five to seven years of hands-on negotiation experience to develop a warranted contracting officer. With the imminent retirement of many seasoned contracting professionals,

it is imperative that we recruit top-notch talent and find creative ways to accelerate their training. We just don't have the luxury of five to seven years to develop future contracting officers.

At Warner Robins, we've made next-generation workforce development part of everyone's responsibility. It's becoming part of our culture. Developing the workforce is, in many ways, like parenting children. Parents who focus little time and effort on raising their children will likely produce poorly developed adults. On the other hand, parents who provide their children with good role models, growth experiences, and lots of coaching are more likely to raise responsible adults. We believe it is well worth the investment of our time and energy to recruit the very best talent and then provide them increasingly challenging work with mentoring oversight.

Q *The Macon State educational partnership with Warner Robins Air Force Base is highly touted as an example to emulate across DoD. Can you explain how this partnership works and why it is so exceptional?*

A The Macon State partnership started with the quest to reduce the amount of time—five to seven years—it takes employees to become proficient in federal government contracting. While an academic degree that includes business courses provides a strong foundation, somehow we had to find a way to accelerate the time required for new employees to become skilled in contracting. Our educational partnership started with the idea of creating a single college undergraduate elective in contracting so graduates we later hired would have a fundamental understanding of contracting principles. But I was thinking way too

small, and brainstorming the possibilities with our Warner Robins Defense Acquisition University satellite campus manager, Debbie Johnson, caused the initial concept to blossom into a multiple-course concept. We approached Barbara Frizzell, Macon State College vice president of academic affairs, to see if our concept was feasible. Through several months of discussions and curriculum reviews, and through learning the jargon of each other's respective institutions, the initiative evolved into three undergraduate electives available to students majoring in general business, management, or marketing. These courses—Principles of Contracting, Contract Evaluation and Award, and Contract Pricing—along with other business prerequisites would incorporate DAU-required level I and II course material and be taught by college adjunct professors who are also contracting leaders on the base. Our goal was to seek DAU level I and II contracting course equivalency so students gain that essential understanding of government-unique contracting principles before they are hired. This shift in training responsibility is projected to save the government up to 12 weeks of classroom and online time and \$14,000 per student.

What makes this concept so attractive is it creates a win-win proposition for all involved. The Air Force can now hire students who have completed the government-unique contract courses, saving time and money and creating an established pipeline for hiring new contracting employees. The college benefits by attracting additional students and then providing clear opportunities for post-graduation employment. DAU gains the opportunity to shift valuable instructor and classroom time to other students and other academic needs. This concept model can also be applied to other acquisition career fields with the same benefits. Another plus is the growth opportunity provided to senior contracting leaders who are serving as adjunct professors at the college level for the first time.

Several years ago, we started a contracting college co-op [*cooperative education*] program, allowing college juniors and seniors the opportunity to work on the base 20 to 32 hours a week for up to two years before they graduate. This co-op program gives them hands-on experience in contracting and allows both the students and us as the employer to assess if a particular student will succeed in contracting. What excites me is the possibility that co-op students who also complete the nine hours of government contracting courses may be able to qualify for contracting officer warrants several years sooner because of the academic and practical knowledge they gain while still in college. So the combination of smart recruiting and training initiatives can compress the time required to develop future contracting officers.

Q
Can you tell us about the outside interest and the spin-off benefits of the educational partnership?

A
It has been very exciting to see this partnership take on a life of its own—and one we never envisioned. When the concept was under discussion, Macon State indicated that a minimum enrollment of 12 students was necessary to break even financially. To encourage additional enrollment, we shared the concept with local defense industry representatives. To function best in their jobs, defense contractors need an awareness of the principles of government contracting. Last December, when registration opened for the January 2008 semester, we waited with baited breath to see if our local communication campaign would generate sufficient students. We were hoping for 12 students, and when 20 or 25 students registered for the class, Macon State decided to move the Principles of Contracting course to a larger classroom. Ultimately 30 students completed the first class in May, and all three classes are being offered during the summer 2008 session. So the response has been exceptional, and 39 students are enrolled for the summer 2008 classes!

We've had the opportunity to brief the educational partnership many times, both locally and to contracting groups at other locations. Several communities have expressed interest in replicating the concept, and they call or visit us to seek advice and lessons learned. It has been very exciting to receive inquiries from DoD organizations, particularly when we have no idea how they learned about the initiative.

Recently, Macon State College received a grant from the State of Georgia to expand and enhance our educational partnership. The state is very interested in encouraging market-based academics in state colleges and universities to meet the educational needs of major employers in surrounding communities. Warner Robins Air Force Base, as the largest industrial employer in the state of Georgia, certainly qualifies as a major employer.

Q
You've been involved in a contracting training service called PK University. Can you talk about that and how it has benefited Warner Robins?

A
PK University is a simple concept to organize and communicate local contracting training opportunities. I learned about the concept at another Air Force base, and we've adopted and grown the idea at Robins. Because contracting is a highly regulated career field, we're always conducting training classes on a wide variety of topics. In the past, these training opportunities were advertised through just-in-time e-mails giving notification of an upcoming class. PK University establishes an online annual training catalog—similar to a college catalog. In this course catalog, we list over 50 courses that are available throughout the

year, providing course descriptions and projected training schedules.

So, for example, if I am assigned as the buyer on an upcoming source selection and this is new and unfamiliar work, I can go to my personal computer and click on PK University to find out when classroom training will be offered. If I need this expertise before a class is offered, there are links to other sources of online training, including the DAU continuous learning modules.

PK University at Robins has expanded its original offerings and now includes training provided by our small business advisors, the legal staff, and our source selection experts in the Acquisition Center of Excellence. PK University is a simple concept to heighten training awareness and make classes and online resources more available. Several other contracting organizations at other bases use PK University and our training rather than duplicate the concept at their location. We were very proud when PK University was designated an under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics workforce development best practice in 2006.

Q *Another contracting training service you've been involved in is the development of specializing pricing training. Can you talk a bit about that?*

A Contract pricing is an area of specialized expertise that is very critical because it is central to ensuring we pay fair and reasonable prices for the supplies and services we purchase. To help bolster the pricing expertise of our workforce, we established a three-day, hands-on pricing course. Two weeks prior to the course start date, students receive a contractor proposal and are required to become familiar with the material before the class begins. During the two-day training, experienced price analysts guide the class through preparing a proposal spreadsheet in a Microsoft® Excel database and develop the government price objective. They are given sample DCAA [*Defense Contract Audit Agency*] reports, DCMA [*Defense Contract Management Agency*] recommendations, and a technical evaluation. Using all this expertise, the students develop the pre-negotiation price objective. Then the class divides in two. Half the class takes the role of the contractor and the other half assumes the role of the government negotiation team, and they conduct a mock negotiation.

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These negotiations can get very intense. Coached through this entire process by experienced price analysts, the students complete the experience by writing a price negotiation memorandum to document the negotiation and explain why the price is fair and reasonable. Our pricing experts have also created an online electronic template to streamline the documentation process. In a two-day period, someone inexperienced in contract pricing learns about and creates spreadsheets, uses weighted guidelines to develop supportable profit objectives, gains experience in negotiation techniques, and completes the contract file documentation.

Q *What other successful Warner Robins contracting programs can you tell us about?*

A JUMPSTART is a training approach with an interesting beginning. Several years ago, we were fortunate to hire 17 people who were scheduled to start to work in the beginning of August. In contracting, August and September are the busiest time—we are in a full-court press to get last minute requirements on contract before funds expire at the end of the fiscal year. August and September are the worst months to introduce new trainees into the workplace because no one has the time to focus on their training. Our training director approached me and said, “Mrs. Reeves, could we keep the new trainees in the home office for a few weeks and teach them the basics of contracting?” Everyone thought this was a wonderful way to optimize the first few weeks of their contracting career. And so JUMPSTART was created.

While the length and format can be very flexible, JUMPSTART currently provides 12 to 14 weeks of continuous



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training for new contracting employees. During that time, the class is introduced in a sequential fashion to the contract award process, with various training topics presented by the local experts. The students also gain familiarity with the contracting-unique IT systems used for contract preparation and statistical reporting. They complete level I DAU online classes with experts available to facilitate their understanding. They also gain hands-on experience in the process of turning a purchase request requirement into a contract, so they understand the fundamentals when they move into a buying office.

Besides the obvious benefit of turning their first few weeks on the job into productive learning, the trainees build relationships with each other and with the experts who teach them. They learn the right way, from the start, and know whom to call for advice in the future when technical challenges arise. At the end of JUMPSTART, we deliver ready-to-work employees to the buying organization and accelerate their effectiveness.

Q
How do you give new employees hands-on experience once they come onboard Warner Robins?

A
In contracting, knowing the technical fundamentals is critical, but much of the expertise comes from hands-on experience that is guided by a trainer or senior con-

tracting officer. That presents somewhat of a problem because with the high workload demands, mentoring newer employees becomes an extra duty. So we created workload cells grouped around the complexity of the contracting requirements processed. Trainees usually start out in a four-person cube, with two other new contracting employees and an experienced contracting officer. Beginning with simplified acquisitions, the three trainees learn together and benefit from the questions and challenges each of them encounters. Once beginning trainees master simplified purchases, they physically move to another four-person cubicle and work with another trainer to gain experience at the next level of buying complexity. There's a little healthy peer pressure here because no one wants to be left behind as his or her peers graduate to the next level. The last stage in this rotation process is the source selection cell, in which buyers learn the fundamentals of conducting best-value source selections. Right now, there are 34 source selections in process in this area. Once trainees learn these fundamentals, they move to the other buying offices responsible for our more complex acquisitions. It's very energizing to visit these contracting trainee groups. They work hard and play hard and build strong bonds as they learn the contracting business. Their enthusiasm is contagious.

Q
Thank you for your time, Mrs. Reeves.