

Defense Acquisition University Reform The Intersection with Back-to-Basics

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On October 1, 2020, the Senior Leaders of the Defense Acquisition System wrote an article about Transforming the Workforce through the “Back-to-Basics” initiative. In this article, we discussed the challenges we face as a Department—specifically the return to great power competition with near-peer adversaries. The 2018 National Defense Strategy calls on everyone in the national security space to face these threats head-on. Those working toward “Back to Basics” to develop, acquire and sustain operational capability for the force won’t be alone on this journey--we are actively transforming DAU into a modern platform of training and on-the-job resources to provide the support and skills you need for success.

Our adversaries' ability to rapidly adopt new technology is placing pressure on our acquisition cycle times. To succeed, the Defense acquisition system must move with purposeful speed and agility. The Defense Acquisition Workforce must think critically, make smart decisions, and move quickly to give our Warfighters cutting-edge capabilities, ensuring dominance across every domain.

Since her confirmation as the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, Ms. Lord has called on her staff to act as a strategic enabler for the professionals that make our acquisition system work. To this end, we’ve focused on three key areas:

- Streamlining acquisition policy to empower workforce decision making
- Reimagining how we train and develop our workforce
- Transforming DAU into a modern learning platform

Streamlining acquisition policy: The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment released the Adaptive Acquisition Framework in January 2020. This transformational approach to policy provides a set of flexible acquisition pathways designed to empower program managers and acquisition professionals to tailor strategies, speed up acquisition, and address the immediate needs of the Warfighter. The policy embraces the principles of delegated decision-making, tailoring program oversight to minimize unnecessary bureaucratic processes, and actively managing risk based on the unique characteristics of the capability being acquired.

Reimagining how we develop our workforce: In early September 2020, Ms. Lord announced the Back-to-Basics initiative referenced above—the first major reform of the Defense Acquisition Workforce management framework since the early 1990s. This initiative shifts us from a talent management system built for another time, to one that better reflects modern continuous

learning. It will take us “back to the basics” with a sharpened focus on the readiness of the workforce.

Back-to-Basics reinvents the structure of career fields into six functional areas: Program Management, Contracting, Life Cycle Logistics, Engineering and Technical Management, Test and Evaluation, and Business – Financial/Cost Estimating. It will also change the structure of required certification training for each of the functional areas.

Our current three-level certification requires extensive training time—most of it early in a professional’s career--to achieve certification. The certification program is highly structured and overly comprehensive, making it inflexible and inefficient. Too often, training is provided to the wrong people, or at the wrong time. We are changing this structure with two initiatives.

First, we are leaning our certification requirements to a core of training for everyone in a functional area. Unlike the past where everything was required for everybody, we will now only require training that should be broadly applicable in that function area. For example, in contracting, we worked with senior leaders from the military departments and agencies to reduce required certification training from 650 to 250 hours.

Training cannot stop with this required core, however. By reducing required training, we’re creating room for user-driven tailored training, on-the-job training, work experience, training through new DAU tools, and job-relevant “credentials”. These credentials are generally much smaller than a functional certification requirement, but will be structured into learning packages designed to be used by people who need specific knowledge and skills, at the time they need it. The first credentials already exist, and include: Agile Software Acquisition; Digital Engineering; Data Analytics for the DoD Acquisition Managers; Foundational Intellectual Property; Program Protection; and Introduction to Risk, Issue, and Opportunity Management; and several others. The credentials will be tracked, so they follow you through your career. They can serve many different purposes. They can be used to build specialized knowledge and skills within your functional area, so that you are prepared, say, to work in contingency contracting. They support lifelong learning so you can stay up to date in your field. They can help you learn or update your knowledge in rapidly changing cross-functional concepts, like agile development or cybersecurity.

Combined with streamlining certification, credentials will increase the ability to shape careers, teams or organizations--tailoring individual development to what is needed, when it’s needed. New and emerging concepts can be more rapidly disseminated and integrated into the acquisition system, improving its flexibility and performance. This new flexibility will require more initiative and planning by workforce members and supervisors, but the reward will be support for lifelong learning, more dynamic careers, and a better acquisition system.

Transforming DAU into a modern learning platform: With the Adaptive Acquisition Framework we empowered the workforce to make smart decisions with a wide array of new tools. With the Back-to-Basics initiative we freed-up much needed time and created a foundation for customizable training. To help you succeed in this new, dynamic environment, DAU is

transforming into a modern learning platform to deliver career-long learning tailored to your needs.

When DAU opened its doors in the early 1990s, the forces driving education and training – particularly how we all learned and consumed information--were radically different. We were living in a time when information was relatively scarce, and the ways to distribute it were relatively few. Fast forward nearly three decades and the landscape has obviously changed dramatically. Today, instantaneous connections to knowledge, resources, and expertise power the global economy and drive our personal lives. To help you thrive in this environment, DAU is transforming from a schoolhouse to a highly-networked platform, using many different modes and methods to provide information, tools, and training from numerous sources.

This modern platform will have three important characteristics:

- **Frictionless learning that provides easy access to training and resources at the moment of need.** When learning is user-driven and time is scarce, it has to be easy to discover the learning or tools that you need, and that learning has to be targeted and efficient. The new DAU platform will making learning available naturally, intuitively, and precisely when it's needed.
- **World-class content that is high quality, current, and relevant.** In a world where learning is infinitely customizable, we have to make training consumable at the moment of need and personalized to an individual's circumstance. DAU's responsive learning program will produce more and smaller segmented courses—conducted both online and onsite—using advanced learning technologies. In our dynamic and flexible acquisition environment, DAU's content must build critical thinking skills and confidence in each learner's ability to decide and act in order to drive performance excellence. By partnering acquisition subject matter experts with learning science specialists, DAU is developing quality experiences that are personalized, relevant, and informed by the best minds in the field.
- **Dynamic network that connects people who need information to people who have information.** DAU already has scale with its network—it is the only organization connecting all 183,000+ members of the Defense Acquisition Workforce. DAU is working to intentionally build connections between people who have the knowledge and those who need it for success.

How will DAU's transformation impact you?

Quality, engaging content: DAU is completely reimagining how it develops its content, both in the classroom and through informal learning, to ensure it meets the expectations of the modern audience. Expect shorter learning modules, more informal learning, and modern, engaging experiences. Ultimately, much of the learning you do will happen while doing your work rather than in one of DAU's physical classrooms. DAU will also make greater use of its scale, with open online workshops, online communities and online events that connect you with thousands of your acquisition counterparts. The recent virtual TEDxDAU, attended by over 3,000 people, is an example of the power of scale.

Learning tailored to your needs: DAU conducted extensive interviews with stakeholders, acquisition leaders, and you, the members of the Defense Acquisition Workforce. Many of you, and a not-insignificant number of your supervisors, told us the training received from DAU was too general and didn't meet the specific needs of your job or role. To increase the return on investment you make in training and development, DAU has embraced the ethos of the Back-to-Basics initiative and is actively developing job and role-based credentials. These credentials are designed to augment your foundational training and provide you with the knowledge and skills that you decide are needed for your job. The increased use of credentials will also help you build your expertise for future promotions and new professional roles. To date, DAU has released eight credentials with dozens more in development.

Shorter classes: Classroom training can be an incredibly positive learning experience, it's also expensive for the learner and the government. We've already discussed the policy changes we're making to training requirements through the Back-to-Basics initiative, but DAU is also intentionally restructuring its curriculum. These changes will result in shorter classroom courses augmented by a rich array of other learning experiences, including job-specific credentials, informal learning resources (e.g. articles and videos), and an increased use of self-paced topical modules. DAU is focused on using the classroom where it is most powerful—for cross-functional, team-based, and experiential learning.

More online learning: Our continuing experience with extended telework in response to the pandemic has demonstrated that DAU can deliver quality learning in the virtual environment, at scale. DAU is actively working to make these experiences even better by increasing flexibility with more self-paced instruction and designing engaging online exercises to help you apply new knowledge. With this increase in virtual learning, you will no longer have to be away from your job eight hours a day, for weeks at a time. Instead, this pivot will allow you to integrate what you learn directly with the work you do every day. And of course, you'll spend less time away from your home, your friends, and your family.

Learning at the moment of need: YouTube is the go-to learning resource for "do-it-yourself" projects. In the modern world, it just makes sense to watch a quick video to learn a specific task. Why would anyone seek out, and sit through, an eight-hour automotive repair class to replace a headlight, if they can watch an eight-minute video online? Just the thought of doing so probably seems absurd to many of you. There is certainly a time and place for more formal, professional education, but DAU is working to rebalance its curriculum to make sure you can find the focused training you need, when you need it.

Acquisition program consulting: Sometimes a course isn't enough and your project or program needs an outside perspective to help it navigate a tricky challenge. DAU's transformation will enable it continue providing support beyond the classroom as a trusted acquisition partner. From customized, complex simulations, such as helping your team prepare for an upcoming source selection to smaller, more topical workshops on subjects like the Adaptive Acquisition Framework, DAU will be better positioned to help your team succeed.

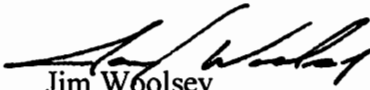
What's next?

The challenges we face as a Department and professionals are daunting, but not insurmountable. Through the Adaptive Acquisition Framework, the Back-to-Basics initiative, and DAU's transformation, we've empowered both individuals and organizations to make programmatic and development decisions that reflect their needs, rather than a mandated, top-down approach. These actions are designed to help our system move with greater speed, agility, and efficiency.

In this new environment, both individuals and supervisors will have increased responsibility for managing training and development opportunities. This will require greater attention to your personal career goals and growth, while also focusing on the needs of your organization. As the adage goes, "with great power, comes great responsibility." You won't be alone as we pivot to this new model; Ms. Lord's offices, DAU, Service Acquisition Executives, Component Acquisition Executives, and DACM offices are working together to provide you with the resources you need to ensure positive acquisition outcomes.



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