

# CULTURE OF CARE— THE DEFENSE CIVILIAN TRAINING CORPS ROLE IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT

by **KAREN DAPONTE THORNTON** and **JOHN WILLISON**



**T**oday's complex challenges demand a workforce strategy to develop agile and adaptable new talent. A new talent development initiative is responding to that need. The initiative is the Defense Civilian Training Corps (DCTC), and with it, the DoD is making an unprecedented investment in its civilian workforce. Change is being made one person at a time, but an exponential impact will result from the culture and team building at the heart of this new movement.

Congress established DCTC to strengthen the talent pipeline for the DoD civilian acquisition workforce (FY20 National Defense Authorization Act). The Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment leads its implementation, leveraging the expertise of the Acquisition Innovation Research Center (AIRC), a consortium of more than 25 universities. DCTC is part of DoD's recruitment strategy to attract and develop talent, foster diversity and innovation, align skills with critical needs, and enhance DoD's employer brand.

The DCTC partnership between DoD and academia represents a first-of-its-kind investment in the readiness of new civilian professionals. Through an integrated curriculum and development approach, DCTC instills in scholars the critical skills, behaviors, and character to have an immediate impact, adapt at a competitive pace, and achieve improved results for the Warfighter.

A recurring theme in DoD's current talent strategy is "culture," which comes from the Latin root *colere* (to cultivate, tend, or honor). To remain competitive, DoD must continue attracting and developing top talent through institutional change and reformed business practices. This was acknowledged by the 2022 National Defense Strategy commitment to cultivate

talent and recruit a workforce with the "skills, abilities, and diversity we need to creatively solve national security challenges in a complex global environment."

Taking care of people and cultivating talent management are DoD strategic priorities (DoD Strategic Management Plan, FY 2022–2026). And at the planning level, the department seeks to promote a retention culture by recognizing employee contributions, promoting opportunities for growth, and fostering a workplace that values diversity of thought, experiences, and backgrounds (DoD Human Capital Operating Plan FY 2022–26, p. 29).

However, acquisition reformers have cautioned that "culture cannot be legislated or regulated" (Report of the Advisory Panel on Streamlining and Codifying Acquisition Regulations, June 2018, Vol. 2, p. 21). Therefore, a traditional scholarship-for-service approach will not suffice for the DCTC talent pipeline. Today's challenges are too complex and the competition for talent too intense. That's why the AIRC team is building into the DCTC pilot a Culture of Care that develops scholars' experimental mindsets with the fortitude to take care of themselves, the courage to care for their teams, and the creativity to care for their communities. The social connection resulting from this kind of investment in culture has

been shown to improve employees' well-being and retain their talents as employees.

### Strategic Development

The National Security Innovation Base Report Card recently awarded a score of "C-" to the pipeline of talent trained and working in national security-relevant fields because "the defense workforce does not fully engage the best of U.S. talent, is aging, and is under-indexed on talent proficient in priority technologies."

Given the current Great Power Competition, DoD must make an enterprise shift from reactively filling individual vacancies to strategically developing talent that can immediately contribute to solving today's most challenging problems and adapt to the future. DCTC's strategic talent development is achieved through an integrated curriculum within a Culture of Care framework designed to build innovative thinkers. DCTC scholars will graduate with the critical skills and mindset needed to contribute on day one to DoD's strategic readiness.

The DCTC pilot program, currently a two-year program for undergraduate juniors and seniors, provides a four-semester integrated curriculum and development approach to learning, combining classroom lessons, active and immersive learning experiences, and project-based summer internships to develop a workforce ready to innovate.

### Integrated Curriculum and Development

The DCTC core curriculum, launched in August 2023, includes four two-credit courses that introduce the DoD structure, explore the

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Defense Acquisition System, and provide an overview of critical technology needs as well as the basics of driving institutional success.

Weekly modules include role-playing activities and gamified learning for teams comprising a mix of degree seekers. Each class replicates the experience of teams executing the DoD acquisition mission and improves retention of critical skills through simulated work activities. In addition to teaching real-life skills, DCTC objectives include developing leaders and team members who are creative, innovative, and critical thinkers (Figure 1).

Outside the classroom, DCTC provides active and immersive learning experiences (such as rapid collaboration events [“hackathons”] and competitions sponsored by DoD partners) on campus and arranges summer internships at DoD organizations where multidisciplinary teams of scholars work on projects across the acquisition life cycle. In partnership with these DoD organizations, DCTC facilitates the security clearance pro-

cess and hiring into the civilian DoD workforce upon graduation.

This integrated learning experience, in and out of the classroom, gives DCTC scholars a variety of opportunities to practice critically needed skills and build resilience behaviors. By the end of the two years, DCTC scholars will join the DoD workforce with confidence and competence.

### Culture of Care Framework

The curriculum, even when augmented with internships, will not create a student sense of connection to the DoD mission unless it involves cultivation, tending, and honoring. Therefore, AIRC has built DCTC within a Culture of Care to foster human connection, meaning, and commitment to serving others—factors of significant value to future generations of the workforce.

Classmates who share a desire to serve forge a social bond that promotes resilience and improves performance. In the DCTC courses, scholars learn, by taking creative risks, that problem solving and innovation hap-

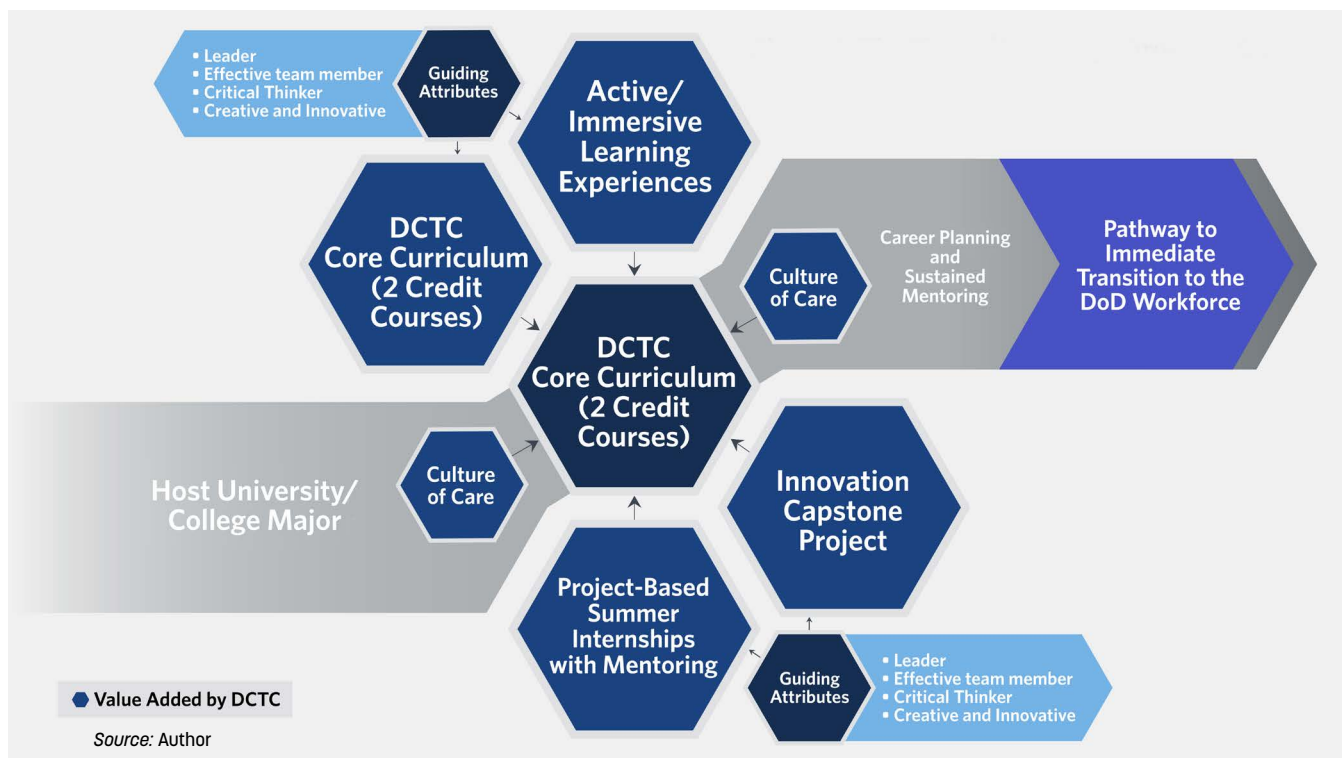
pen collaboratively. The scholars will bring that trust and a common language to their project-based summer internships. In return, the DoD host organizations will provide a mentoring atmosphere to bring out the best in each multidisciplinary team of scholars so that they begin to think in terms of us, not them.

### Culture for Innovative Thinking

The Culture of Care framework is the foundation for developing and nurturing DCTC scholars’ sense of creativity, meaning, and community as the multidisciplinary acquisition workforce of the future. The DCTC Culture of Care is built on a five-part framework adapted from **Jeff Bevis’ 2019 Forbes magazine article**, “5 Ways to Build a Culture of Care in Your Business”:

- (1) **Get to know the team.** Faculty members value respectful communication and teambuilding, and scholars learn to think critically by collaborating across diverse academic and cultural

**Figure 1. The Flow of Learning Through DCTC**





backgrounds in role-playing exercises and gamified learning.

- (2) **Invest in your culture.** Faculty and internship mentors model a commitment to self-awareness and guide scholars' resilience development through weekly assignments in a reflection journal.
- (3) **Hire and recruit with care.** DoD organizations hosting project-based summer internships challenge scholars with projects that encourage experimentation, collaboration across disciplines, and agile thinking in an environment that fosters growth and creativity.
- (4) **Build referrals.** Scholars recruit future DCTC scholars on campus and mentor local high school students who are curious about public service.
- (5) **Celebrate success.** Scholars demonstrate their innovative mindset and showcase their summer internship projects for senior DoD leaders at the annual DCTC Scholar Showcase in Washington, D.C. in July.

Innovative thinking is encouraged in a Culture of Care. DoD's ability to achieve the enduring advantage in the decisive decade depends on the workforce's readiness to embrace innovation. Innovation comes from diversity of thought, which in turn derives from collaboration across a diverse team.

DCTC Cohort 0 includes 87 scholars, who were awarded two-year, full-tuition scholarships in August 2023 with monthly stipends. The members are juniors representing 49 different academic majors (from engineering to finance to political science) at four universities: North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (an HBCU [historically black college and university]), Purdue University, University of Arizona (a Hispanic-serving institution), and Virginia Tech. Competitively selected from 365 applicants, this inaugural cohort of DCTC scholars represents academic, geographic, and demographic diversity:

## SUGGESTED READING

- "China is Fast Outpacing U.S. STEM PhD Growth," Remco Swetsloot et al., Center for Security and Emerging Technology Data Brief, August 2021.
- "The Future of Civilians in National Security," Katherine Kuzminski et al., Center for a New American Security, August 2023.
- *The Resilience Factor: 7 Essential Skills for Overcoming Life's Inevitable Obstacles*, Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté, Broadway Books, 2002.
- *Tomorrowmind*, Gabriella Rosen Kellerman and Martin Seligman, Simon & Shuster, 2023.
- "Tomorrowmind and the Future of Work," Gabriella Rosen Kellerman, *Singularity podcast*, July 17, 2023.
- "Workforce Innovation Readiness: Vital in This Decisive Decade," Marina Theodotou, *Defense Acquisition* magazine, July-August 2023.
- "5 Reasons Social Connections Can Enhance Your Employee Wellness Program," Alan Kohll, *Forbes* magazine, January 2018.

- Twenty-five science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, and 24 majors beyond STEM (in business or other areas) are represented.
- Forty-eight scholars identify as female, 37 as male, and two as nonbinary.
- Twenty-two scholars are African American, eight are Asian, 45 are Caucasian, 10 are Hispanic, and two are Native Pacific Islander.

Michael Morales, a business management major, said that his first semester of DCTC at the University of Arizona was eye opening: "I didn't expect to find such a sense of community. I've heard people talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and now I really understand what that means. Now that I've been in the DCTC class, I see all of these other majors and I'm learning perspectives I never would have thought about." In the DCTC classroom, scholars collaborate across disciplines to work their way around traditional limitations, trying and failing and trying again to solve challenging DoD problems.

Preparing the future workforce to be creative risk-takers starts with finding commonality and meaning, then practicing the skills needed to immediately contribute and building character through a commitment to lifelong learning. These learnable skills include resilience, which is essential to supporting continuous growth and development, especially in the face of unpredictable change.

Resilience is a way of responding to situations that involves thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. *Developing* resilience involves complex behavioral and psychological skills. The DCTC curriculum includes lessons on resilience as part of its introduction to the DoD organization and acquisition system. DoD-sponsored hackathons, competitions, and project-based summer internships all create opportunities to practice the skills that build resilience: emotional regulation, optimism, cognitive agility, self-compassion, and self-efficacy.

Throughout the spring semester of their junior year and during the summer internship, DCTC scholars practice and strengthen these resilience



DAU President Jim Woolsey speaks to DCTC scholars on March 18, 2024, at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va.

Source: Photo courtesy of Virginia Tech National Security Institute.

skills much as an athlete works to build muscle. (Scholars are assigned to read “The Resilience Factor,” by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté, which includes a resilience quotient test and skill-building exercises.)

As a team, they conduct After Action Reviews following each event outside the classroom to gain more practice in identifying lessons. This investment in continuous practice sparks a recognition that building emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and self-compassion is a lifelong pursuit. With increased resilience, DCTC scholars can adapt and become agile while remaining centered and calm.

DCTC’s resilience-building efforts align with a new workforce initiative by the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment to bring employee well-being into balance with mission demands. As new DoD employees who possess the sense of agency and room for creativity that comes with resilience, DCTC scholars are more likely to continue as department employees.

### Resilience Equals Readiness

DCTC is more than a pathway to civilian service; it’s the start of a movement to change how DoD develops and unleashes talent. DCTC

is revolutionary in its integrated curriculum and development framework, built within a Culture of Care that includes lessons and practical opportunities to strengthen resilience skills and build social connections. When DCTC scholars join the DoD civilian workforce, they will be prepared to enable innovation and adapt at a competitive pace.

DAU’s new Innovate to Win initiative has developed a metric that provides leadership with insight on baseline innovation skills and the workforce’s level of confidence in their own skills. That metric was described by [Dr. Marina Theodotou](#) in the July-August 2023 issue of *Defense Acquisition* magazine.

These competencies include, among others, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, growth mindset, observing, and risk-taking. DAU’s metric can reveal DCTC scholars’ ability to “navigate technological advances, embrace technological transformation, demonstrate resilience, and collaborate with our allies and partners to solve wicked problems and scale innovation.” This assessment tool also can help ensure that DCTC scholars find their fit when starting their DoD careers. Talent matching is an essential

component of employee retention and ensuring that DoD receives a meaningful return on its DCTC investment.

The first cohort of DCTC scholars will graduate in 2025. Wherever their careers take them, their personal character will demonstrate the value of the Culture of Care. In constant pursuit of personal development, they will grow as they witness their own successes. And their commitment will yield improved results for the Warfighter.

**THORNTON** is currently a fellow at the Acquisition Innovation Research Center (AIRC) and a member of the adjunct faculty at the George Washington University (GW) Law School. She has served as a professional staff member for the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee and led the Government Procurement Law program at GW Law School. Thornton holds a B.A. from Providence College, a J.D. from the Georgetown University Law Center, and an LL.M. from GW Law School.

**WILLISON** is currently a fellow at the AIRC, founder and president of J Willison Consulting LLC, and a certified Executive Coach. He retired after 36 years as an Army civilian, the last 11 years as a member of the Senior Executive Service. Willison earlier served in a wide range of Army leadership and technical positions that spanned research and development, acquisition, and sustainment. He holds a B.S. from Lafayette College, served as a senior executive fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, and earned a professional certificate in leadership coaching for organizational well-being from George Mason University.

The authors can be contacted at [kthornto@stevens.edu](mailto:kthornto@stevens.edu) and [jwilliso@stevens.edu](mailto:jwilliso@stevens.edu).

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