



Innovations in Program Management Training

The PMT 401 Experience

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FROM ITS EARLIEST DAYS, THE DEFENSE ACQUISITION UNIVERSITY (DAU) HAS OFFERED A CAPSTONE program management course. Over the years, this course has evolved from lectures by subject-matter-expert faculty to a more interactive, team-based learning curriculum. Recent changes have been made to improve the sequencing and integration of key course themes, add more “hands on” learning exercises, strengthen the focus on program leadership, and provide more follow-up support to graduates as they return to the workplace. Let’s look at the PMT 401 Program Manager’s Course and highlights of the curriculum and delivery approaches now used in this course.

Critical Thinking

A major goal of PMT 401 is to hone students’ critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (see the goals in the sidebar). Program management is full of complex challenges and dilemmas requiring effective analysis

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PMT 401 Student Learning Goals

- Improve your critical thinking
- Hone your problem-solving and decision-making skills
- Enhance your ability to lead in an acquisition environment
- Discover and develop best practices
- Embed a habit of reflection and life-long learning

Source: PMT 401 Orientation Briefing.

Case Studies

The PMT 401 course initially was based on the Harvard case study and analysis methodology and included more than 80 defense acquisition case studies written by DAU students and faculty. These case studies provide an opportunity to explore how program managers think and make decisions in a variety of acquisition scenarios. Our focus on real dilemmas facilitates a deeper understanding of management and leadership challenges in the acquisition environment. It also prompts students to reflect on how and why they think and make decisions on their own programs and to share best practices with the class. Case studies remain an important part of the PMT 401 curriculum, but we have cut in half the number of case discussions. We found that while the case method is still applicable, there is a limit to its effectiveness as a prevailing methodology. We also have carefully scheduled the sequence of cases to provide increasing skill development of our key frameworks and learning objectives. This takes the form of a “learn, practice, and apply” evolution where students become increasingly proficient in using the skill or framework as the course continues. As an example, students learn a framework and process for stakeholder management on an acquisition program starting in Week One. They practice using the framework in later case studies and then must apply the framework in our final simulation exercise and in their 90-day transition plans.

Simulations

As the number of case studies has decreased, the number of simulations and experiential exercises has increased. This has given a more “hands on” flavor to the PMT 401 experience. In addition to analyzing a written case study, students are required to “be” managers in live-action scenarios. These exercises typically are very engaging, competitive, and fast paced. We have integrated simulations throughout the course to replicate real-life scenarios that help students demonstrate their leadership skills and strategies in negotiating, communicating, and implementing solutions in different situations. These simulations provide firsthand benefits and consequences that result from their

and timely decisions. Individual decisions are based on how you think and process information. Critical thinking improves your decision-making abilities by raising your awareness about the influences on your thinking. While our students already have experience in analysis and decision making, we focus on practical skills to improve the quality of their thinking. We have observed that the more our learners understand how and why they think a certain way, the better they become at evaluating and improving their judgment in the acquisition environment.

Every aspect of the PMT 401 curriculum presents opportunities for critical thinking and decision making accompanied by time for reflection and feedback. This is illustrated in the following review of our case studies, simulations, and experiential exercises.

thinking, actions, and decisions. They also offer insight into how their peers work, think and act—insight that is invaluable in leading teams in the acquisition environment.

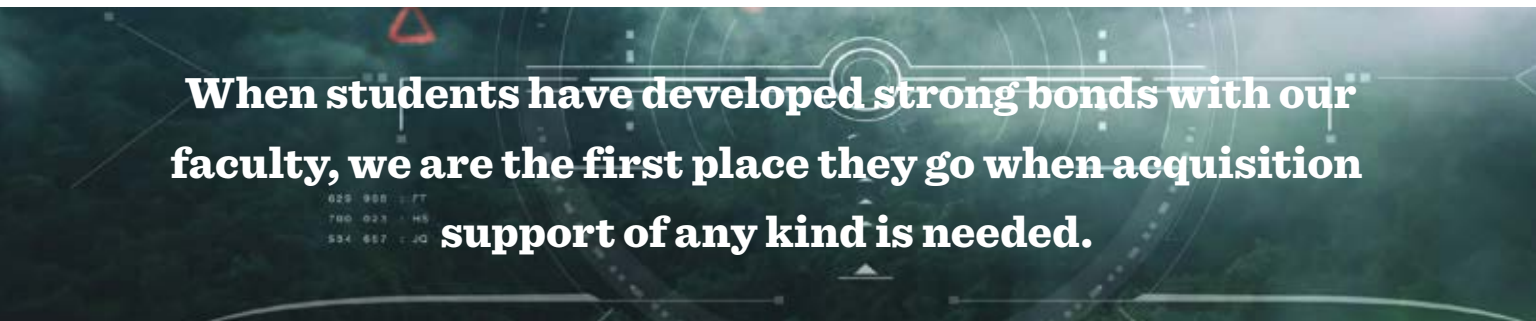
Everest and Judgment in a Crisis are two computer-based simulations from Harvard Business Publishing that are used in our curriculum. In the Everest leadership and team simulation, teams of students compete to reach the summit of Mount Everest. During the 6 simulated climbing days, participants face different individual and team challenges. We use this simulation as an “ice breaker” to allow our new student teams to practice critical thinking and decision making as well as group dynamics and leadership. Judgment in a Crisis is an organizational behavior simulation used in the critical thinking session to have students practice their thinking

and response to a managerial crisis situation in order to gain a better understanding of several factors that impair judgment and decision making.

Experiential Exercises

Successful problem solving and decision making are at the heart of all effective teams. The exercises used in both small and large group settings require team members to analyze information, negotiate, and collaborate with one another. These activities encourage individuals and teams to develop their creative thinking, leadership, and communication skills, while building group cooperation and consensus.

One of the most impactful experiential exercises in PMT



When students have developed strong bonds with our faculty, we are the first place they go when acquisition support of any kind is needed.

and response to a managerial crisis situation in order to gain a better understanding of several factors that impair judgment and decision making.

Our newest simulation is Harborco, a multi-role, multi-issue exercise designed to teach principles of coalition building and negotiation. The scenario features a consortium of developer, industry, and shipping concerns interested in building and operating a deep-water port. The negotiations include environmental, labor, economic, and government oversight issues. The simulation was developed by the Harvard Program on Negotiation.

Our most extensive exercise is the 2-day “tiger team” analysis of a simulated Program Executive Office that includes a family of unmanned aerial vehicles in different development stages. This simulation was created by two DAU faculty members (John Driessnack and Patrick Barker) to give students “hands-on” leadership experience in a more strategic portfolio management scenario. The simulation is based on real-world issues faced by current acquisition programs with a goal of helping students use the key frameworks and tools taught in PMT 401 to address these challenges. The simulation includes leadership roles where many students work on problems similar to those they will face back in their jobs, after which they brief a senior acquisition executive who acts as the service ac-

401 is our peer feedback process. In the early PMT 401 offerings, faculty “graded” student contributions and provided individual feedback. This was discontinued in favor of a team or peer feedback process. The framework for this process is Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI), which was developed by the Center for Creative Leadership. The SBI model is designed to elicit clearer and more direct feedback from a broader group of students and faculty members. Instead of feedback like “great comment you made in class this morning,” a student might say, “When our discussion in the C-130 case seemed to wander off topic (Situation), you linked specific student comments as an example of stakeholder management (Behavior), which proved to be a key learning outcome from the case discussion (Impact).” After the SBI process is explained and demonstrated early in the course, we use existing student teams and faculty facilitators to provide feedback to each other. Use of the SBI process not only produces better feedback to students during the course, but it becomes a process students can take back to their workplace and use with members of their real-world project teams.

Our media workshop ranks as the most popular experiential exercise in our course. Each student is interviewed in a print, Skype and taped format. These interactions provide realistic acquisition scenarios with faculty role-playing as



A student outbriefing at a PMT 401 class graduation event last November.

Photo by Debbie Gonzalez, DAU Visual Arts and Press

media interviewers. To ensure that candid feedback and observations are received, video recordings are immediately reviewed with student groups who experienced the same scenario and with public affairs experts. One student commented, “My favorite part of the course. Being able to see yourself on camera, receive critiques and develop confidence in your ability to navigate the media was invaluable. Well organized and realistic.”

A recent addition is each student’s personal transition plan exercise to apply what they learned when they are back on the job. A simple template is provided for students to list their near-term goals along with 30-, 60- and 90-day action steps to accomplish the personal and organizational goals. Students discuss their plans with their team and faculty advisor to help clarify and improve their product. Faculty advisors then are asked to follow up with students 3 to 6 months after graduation to check on their progress and provide any help if needed. Examples of student comments include “excellent forcing function” and “it made me think of what my priorities would be and how to achieve them.”

In addition to traditional analytical methods of problem solving, we now emphasize the more creative approach of design thinking. The focus of design thinking is human centered problem solving, innovative solutions, and early prototyping. After a session introducing key concepts in design thinking, each student group is chartered to work on a real world problem currently impacting one of their workplaces. This includes interviewing a broad range of workforce members affected by this problem.

Student groups work on their projects during the last part of the PMT 401 course, then present their prototype solutions as part of their graduation exercise (see photo of student outbriefing).

Leadership Development

Acquisition programs require effective management of budget, schedule and risk, as well as leadership skills. Program leaders must clearly communicate their visions and plans, set high standards, and motivate, and guide team members to achieve positive acquisition outcomes. As PMT 401 has evolved, the curriculum has expanded from a primary focus on program cost, schedule and performance to a broader acquisition leadership emphasis. This shift was driven primarily by our students. In fact, they demanded it whenever we asked them what they most wanted to learn.

Once we got their message, we went to work to revise our curriculum. But rather than teach leadership, we chose to refocus our case studies and class exercises on the leadership issues and lessons inherent in each management dilemma. We just needed to make them a priority, and the success is now evident from recent student evaluations:

“First DAU course to really emphasize the leadership aspects and first leadership course which provided practical tools and frameworks.”

“The utility of the course overall to enhance my ability to lead in an acquisition environment—which I think is the purpose of the course—is outstanding.”

Residential Program

A key factor in the success of PMT 401 is the collaborative residential program that was designed for these senior acquisition leaders. As a change to its earlier history, the course has fewer lectures, guest speakers, and even case studies—and more interactive seminars, small group discussions, and one-on-one coaching from faculty and student peers. This decentralized approach to interaction in small groups was designed to promote greater skill building and behavior change.

While we use a variety of educational methods and update them frequently, it is the collaborative learning climate that really makes PMT 401 effective. Faculty members encourage student peer teaching and facilitate this reciprocal teaching in all learning activities. As the course continues, the faculty and students gradually merge into a learning community. This is evidenced by student comments from our most recent PMT 401 class:

“I learned much more about myself and vastly improved my acquisition knowledge ... primarily by learning from others.”

“I have been blown away by the level of learning, teamwork and development that I have received in this course. I have made additional professional colleagues that I know I can reach out to in the future, and, for me, those connections are immeasurable.”

“The true beauty of the course was the interaction with other senior acquisition professionals. Seeing and hearing how others would address an issue was invaluable. This is something that could never be done virtually.”

The in-person relationship development between students and faculty in PMT 401 is unlike any other course we have experienced either at DAU or in academia. It is not uncommon for direct communication to continue between students and faculty for months or even years after their course was completed.

This community building also pays great dividends for DAU's other initiatives, such as mission assistance and executive coaching. Most of our workplace support (mission assistance) projects come directly from graduates of our 400-level executive courses, especially PMT 401. When students have developed strong bonds with our faculty, we are the first place they go when acquisition support of any kind is needed.

Continuous Improvement

The current construct of PMT 401 enables the faculty to rapidly prototype new content, methodology, and sequencing of learning events. Over the past year, the team has researched, piloted, and refined several learning activities to ensure that the course is relevant to acquisition professionals now and in their immediate future. After each course offering, the faculty and staff review and evaluate student feedback and faculty observations of each learning event. DAU's capstone Program Manager's Course must anticipate and make adjustments quickly while maintaining a constant pace of development to better serve the talented acquisition professionals who will lead our largest and most complex acquisition programs.

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