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One-of-a-Kind Distance Learning Program Develops DOD's Cost Estimators

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Article By: MC3 Michael Ehrlich

"Cost and effectiveness estimates form the basis for decisions regarding future Naval forces and weapon systems."

These words, as written in SECNAV Instruction 5223.2, are part of the guiding vision behind the Naval Postgraduate School's Master of Cost Estimating and Analysis (MCEA) curriculum, a one-of-a-kind degree program wholly focused on developing competent, skilled DOD estimators – an often forgotten player in the acquisition process until cost overruns in the millions of dollars are grabbing headlines across the country.

Greg Mislick, lecturer in the Department of Operations Research at NPS and collaborator on the MCEA program, helped develop the curriculum to re-educate cost estimators in all branches of the military and across DOD.

"The program is intended to teach new and experienced cost estimators how to more effectively determine the cost of large DOD weapon systems," said Mislick. "To do so, you have to have a curriculum that teaches not only cost estimation techniques, but it must also discuss how to operate the budget of a program, teach how the DOD and U.S. Navy acquisition processes work, and how hardware systems are developed. The Honorable Sean Stackley, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition, told me, 'We don't need more cost estimators, we need better ones.'"

NPS originally developed the MCEA program through a joint effort with the Air Force Institute of Technology, which has a resident cost estimation curriculum. But NPS' program is the first master's offered in this field through distance learning.

The first graduating class from the program included student cohorts from Los Angeles Air Force Base, U.S. Naval Air Systems Command, Naval Sea Systems Command, Naval Surface Warfare Center, and two groups from the Pentagon. And while the majority of the participants have been DOD civilians, there are active duty graduates from all branches of the service, and even one graduate from Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Lab.

Professor in the NPS Department of Operations Research Dr. Daniel Nussbaum is one of the program managers for the MCEA effort.

"The MCEA program is unique [to NPS] because other universities can't put a program like this together, especially for the price we do," said Nussbaum. "There is a whole body of cost estimating that had not really been organized for a degree program. We took all the information that was needed, categorized it, organized it and created classes."

Graduating students are required to complete group capstone projects developed using real problems and situations in the agencies and departments the students will return to. Mislick notes, "Through Dr. Nussbaum's points of contact, we are able to talk to the heads of all these agencies and find out what they need, and to decide what should be in the program."

The field of cost estimating has its own accreditation founded through the DOD's Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA). DAWIA was established to recognize persons in the acquisition workforce as having achieved professional status and that they possess the education, training and experience standards necessary for a career level in any acquisition, technology and logistics career field.

"In many acquisition positions in the DOD, it is required that you have this DAWIA level certification," said Nussbaum. "The first two MCEA cohorts have received approval from the Army, Navy and Air Force, that anyone who completes this program is automatically validated for the DAWIA educational requirements for levels 1, 2 and 3 in the Business – Cost Estimation career field."

Retired Navy Cmdr. Kevin Maher, a former Supply Corps officer and an integral member of the MCEA program team, recently helped the curriculum facilitate its first sponsor review, where intended educational outcomes are verified and matched with knowledge gained.

"Every curriculum is defined by the educational skill requirements," said Maher. "The end result is validation that every person that walks across the stage and is handed a degree holds those skills."

MCEA courses are instructed in one of four ways: web-based or asynchronously, Elluminate live, video tele-education, and Defense Connect Online.

The asynchronous classes allow students to log onto the appropriate website at a time of their choosing to work on a course when convenient but within required times set by the instructor.

Elluminate is an interactive online program that allows an interaction between the instructor and students through video, voice, text, chat and an interactive whiteboard with application, document and video sharing.

VTE offers a more traditional interaction where students would attend a video teleconference in a classroom setting. Finally, DCO is an instruction method similar to Elluminate.

"Many people have seen the light," said Nussbaum. "They are sending people to this program for the invested benefits that they will gain from having highly-trained individuals in cost estimate analysis."

For more information on the program, visit the MCEA website at: http://www.nps.edu/Academics/DL/DLPrograms/Programs/degProgs_MCEA.html



The latest Master of Cost Estimating and Analysis graduating cohort is honored during a ceremony in the Hall of Heroes in the Pentagon in April of this year. NPS' one-of-a-kind degree program, focused on the development of competent, skilled DOD cost estimators, is delivered completely over distance learning technologies.

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