CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

University of Dayton's master's program aims to fill the government contracting gap

June 09, 2023
Kim Palmer

The University of Dayton has one of only a few government contracting program master's programs in the country.

Every dollar spent by the federal government, whether it is for paper clips or hypersonic jet engines, needs to be accounted for, and those contracts can be as profitable as they are difficult to write. They also require an expansive corps of professionals on both the private and government side to keep the trillion-dollar process flowing.

The fact is that the United States is the largest purchaser in the world. The federal government alone in 2021 spent more than $145 billion on goods and services.

"We do about $4 billion in federal contracting here in the state of Ohio," explains Everett M. Woodel Jr., the Small Business Administration's Ohio district director. "Dayton's Wright-Patterson Air Force Base alone spends $739 million in Ohio and about 39% ... goes directly to small businesses in the state."

More than five years ago, an official from Wright-Patterson approached leaders at the University of Dayton to help with what they saw as a dearth of trained and experienced government contracting and procurement professionals, due in part to an increase in retirements.

Dayton in turn created a 30-credit-hour master's degree program in the School of Law to fast-track students for the in-demand but little-known career in government contracting and procurement.

"There are not that many colleges and universities that offer that sort of program," said Julie Edwards, administrator of the University of Dayton's government contracting program. "The baby boomers are leaving, and they're taking 30 years of experience with them for a job that can take a good five years to get someone up to speed."

The program, made up of between 60 and 70 students, has been completely online since COVID, but the classes are live and interactive, Edwards said. Students are not required to take the LSAT but need to have at least a bachelor's degree to be accepted.

Leveraging a partnership with Wright-Patterson's Air Force Research Laboratory, the program is taught by working government and military officials as adjunct professors. And since the program has gone online now, that includes experts from all around the country.

"We are approved by the U.S. Department of Defense, work with the National Defense Industrial Association as a training partner, and we have collaborations, connections with the government and private sectors," Edwards said. "Our classes are all taught by working professionals who are actually in the industry themselves. They know what they're talking about."

Students can complete the three semesters of credits in one year, or a maximum of four if they work a full-time job. There is also the option to pursue a hybrid degree—offered to those who already have a master's and do not want to work on another degree—and a 12-15-credit path to complete a certificate program. Read more here.

"The program is very flexible, because most of the students are working professionals," Edwards said. "We have students in Colorado, we have students in Canada. COVID showed us we could go completely online and remote. It's been a great way to open the door nationally, because people don't have to actually be here."

Contracting expertise is in high demand because—although selling to the U.S. government and its many agencies can be challenging— it is possible with the right expertise, for relatively small companies to win extremely large government contracts.

Edwards recalls a story about "an elegant woman from Newport Beach" who held a contract to dismantle decommissioned ships for the U.S. Navy, something that is the very definition of "grunt work," she said. This woman, Edwards points out, did not fit the type who would be associated with the tough manual labor of metal scrapping and did none of the actual work, but she was adept at writing the proposal that eventually got her the multimillion-dollar contract.

For every huge multimillion-dollar contract that goes to a Fortune 500 firm like Boeing or Lockheed Martin, there is a small business that sells light bulbs to the federal government, Edwards notes.

"It's a very broad spectrum of need," said Jason Pickart, president of the Dayton chapter of the National Contracting Management Association (NCMA). "Writing a proposal for a government contract is not an easy task—some companies will spend millions, but what is important when working with the government is that you know the language and the laws."

Pickart said a good government contracting professional can work within the "gray space" when it comes to interpreting what the government needs or wants.

Companies looking to work with the government must follow the Federal Acquisition Regulation system, the primary guide to acquisition of supplies and services with appropriated funds, but he points out that unless it is specifically prohibited, it can be interpreted as "possible." That is where a trained professional comes in.

Often the government does not quite know what it wants when it submits the request for proposals, Pickart said. It is that gray space where there is enormous flexibility to negotiate good deals and where a contractor can put together a compelling proposal, he said.

Graduates from the Dayton program are in high demand, as increased federal spending and government programs push using commercial technology to address energy, broadband, and infrastructure build-out funded by the Inflation Reduction Act and bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

"Nobody dreams of being a contracting agent when they grow up, because not many people really know about it," Edwards said. "But it is a high-demand job, and our students either increase their standing with a current employer or go on to increase their pay elsewhere."