

Accelerating Strategic Thinking Capabilities to Drive and Support National Security

US NAVY STRATEGIC THINKING PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY



EXECUTIVE EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING

*Provided by the University of Virginia
Darden School Foundation*

A Step Change in Strategic Thinking Capabilities for Your Most Senior Officers and Decision-Makers



UVA Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning has worked in deep partnership with the U.S. Navy since **1973**, providing rigorous yet flexible learning solutions that dynamically upskill senior officers and decision-makers through to the highest echelons of command.

The U.S. Navy Strategic Thinking (NST) program is a flagship learning experience that accelerates the critical thinking and decision-making capabilities of U.S. Navy and Marine Corps flag officers, Senior Executive Service (SES) personnel and international flag officers from selected allied navies – all with the highest levels of enterprise-wide responsibility for operations, resources and lives.

NST is an intense and immersive five and a half day learning experience that convenes three cohorts of participants each year. The program is delivered on grounds at Darden and is led by Darden faculty under the direction of Professor Jared Harris, a globally recognized thought leader in strategy, ethics and entrepreneurship.

Participants are challenged to enact a step change in their thinking: from tactical to strategic. Together, they explore strategic thinking through three distinct lenses:

- Thinking strategically
- Acting strategically
- Influencing strategically

Laser-focused on the U.S. Navy's unique challenges and capability requirements, NST integrates military content with diverse and illustrative case studies from the corporate context to broaden perspectives while accelerating agile decision-making and honing strategic leadership capabilities. NST fully leverages UVA Darden's well-established and trusted partnership with the US Navy and the attendant expertise of some of the School's most senior faculty. Currently in its 12th year of deployment, the program has comprehensively upgraded the skills and aptitudes of 24 cohorts and 640 Navy officers and SES since its inception.

This paper explores how we do it.

The Challenge

The U.S. Navy (including the U.S. Marine Corps) is the maritime service branch of the United States Armed Forces and one of the largest and most complex elite military organizations on the planet. Today, the Navy faces unprecedented uncertainty, both geopolitically and strategically, as it goes forward. The risks and opportunities ahead include understanding the provenance, magnitude and capabilities of existing and potential enemies — things that are in tremendous and constant flux.

To stay ahead of threats and leverage all possible advantages, the Navy needs to invest in the continuous upskilling and reskilling of its flag and general officers, as well as its SES civilian peers across different services and agencies. The Navy is able to deliver a number of executive learning opportunities from within the organization, including its Navy Executive Development Program and other programs offered by the US Department of Defense. However, it is limited in its ability to enact the kind of advanced, strategic thinking development that its most senior officers require as they ascend to Flag level.

Making the transition to Admiral or General requires a significant shift in strategic and agile decision-making: a definitive step change in cognitive and leadership capabilities from tactical excellence to enterprise wide, to assess the possibilities, mobilize and align resources in real time, and better position the organization itself for future threats and global change — even as that future and change are unfolding in unforeseen ways. Making this step change calls for senior officers and SES executives to think and act differently as they continue to develop. They will have to:

- Distinguish between the tactical and strategic outcomes
- Refine big picture and long-range visions over near-term tactical solutions
- Inspire and guide teams, thus reinforcing trust and shared commitment to mission accomplishment
- Appreciate the global impact of leadership decisions and how they nest within the larger Department of Defense National Security Strategy as well as the CNO's Design for Maritime Superiority



To enact this kind of transformation, the Navy needs a trusted learning partner with the focused expertise in leadership development — one with the evidence-based content, the knowledge and the pedagogy — to accelerate relevant and strategic-planning, execution and transformation capabilities in real time and in the face of uncertainty. It needs a partner to deliver a learning solution that:

- Accelerates participants' understanding of the Navy's strategic vision
- Enhances their ability to develop and execute organizational strategy
- Empowers participants' collaboration, ethical decision-making and change leadership capabilities
- Builds management and leadership skills across risk, finances, human capital and performance to drive and cascade impact

To be truly effective, this program also needs to:

- Deliver impact fast enough that it minimizes time away from existing responsibilities
- Be agile and adaptable enough to respond to emerging and evolving learner needs and organizational realities
- Be scalable and sustainable enough to be offered to new cohorts coming up through the ranks

Getting to Work: A Collaborative, Customized Approach

In 2019, building on its long-standing relationship with the school, the U.S. Navy again partnered with UVA Darden to create the bespoke learning solution that precisely matched these needs.

Navy Leaders and Flag Matters worked shoulder-to-shoulder with UVA Darden professors to:

- Analyze, pinpoint and refine the strategic thinking and leadership skills that Naval officers need to accelerate for the most senior ranks of leadership
- Identify the core learning objectives that align to this skill development
- Design the program curriculum around these learning objectives and determine a delivery timeframe and pedagogy that worked for participants' and organizational needs
- Define the right feedback and evaluation mechanisms to capture impact and surface new and emerging needs or concerns

“Darden has a long-standing, 50+ year relationship with the U.S. Navy, built on trust and experience. It is very much part of our wheelhouse to develop and deliver the kinds of leadership development that our military needs – from first-time officers right through to Admirals.”

- Jennifer Hicks, Managing Director Client Solutions, Executive Education & Lifelong Learning, UVA Darden



“Darden has long distinguished itself by its proximity to practice, and our work with the US military is closely linked to this. We utilize real expertise in engaging officers of all ranks in a way that is consistent across the Navy and yet highly specific to their level — their specific need for capabilities that adapt to changing contexts, and to be more strategic in an unsettled environment. We function as a kind of bridge between the diverse and actionable learnings from the corporate context and the specific elements of military and government work. We connect and engage with best practices, faculty expertise and experiential learning that can be adapted to broad-reaching institutions like the Navy, ensuring it remains strategically and operationally future-resilient.”

Devin Bigoness, Chief Client Officer and Executive Director, Executive Education & Lifelong Learning, UVA Darden

The Solution: the US Navy Strategic Thinking Program



Learning Objectives

- Demonstrate the ability to think and act more strategically and in greater alignment with the Navy's overall strategic vision
- Build the ethical decision-making capabilities across character and competence to align to core Navy values
- Understand the complexity of today's adaptive and ambiguous national security environment and the global impact of leadership decisions
- Forge global collaboration and partnerships to drive better strategic outcomes
- Accelerate change leadership and core management skills across risk, finance, human capital and performance to drive and cascade impact



Solution: On-Grounds Experience with UVA Darden Faculty and Expert Speakers

- Full weeklong immersion on Grounds with Darden professors, military expert speakers and a diverse cohort of fellow US Navy and Marine Corps flag officers, members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) and international flag officers from selected allied navies
- Schedule of intense, focused, expert-led sessions on strategic thinking, change, adaptive and inclusive leadership, ethical decision-making, scenario-planning and strategy in action, strategies for sustaining behavioral change and major ideas for action
- Diverse case studies and discussion-based analysis leveraging both real-world corporate and military scenarios to situate concepts and theory in action
- Led and directed by top UVA Darden faculty team: unique mixture of leading scholars, U.S. Navy Flag Officer guest speakers, practitioners and subject matter experts



Results and Future Outcomes:

- Participants fully engaged and motivated
- Unique opportunity to network, interface and exchange ideas and perspectives with peers from different theaters and allied organizations, as well as Darden faculty experts
- Direct application of learning on actual, real-world challenges and projects
- Enhanced strategic capabilities at an organizational level aligned to Navy's overall strategy and vision
- Greatly enhanced agility, creative problem-solving and overall organizational resilience for unprecedented change and volatility in VUCA environment
- Program replicable and repeatable across successive and upcoming cohorts of senior officers and personnel

The Solution: the US Navy Strategic Thinking Program



Iteration On The Go

The NST program is delivered by senior UVA Darden faculty and U.S. Navy leaders in real time and in response to real and evolving needs. It is critical that the program content, sessions, speakers and delivery methods remain in step with change and 100% relevant to the needs of each cohort. The academic lead of the NST program is Professor Jared Harris, a world authority on strategy and one of UVA Darden's foremost teaching professors. Here's Professor Harris on how NST benefits from iteration on the go:

"We get participants to evaluate the program directly — class by class and overall. In addition, Flag Matters personnel sit in each course, and we also often have a senior mentor (usually a retired Admiral) sitting in the course as well. We always hot wash and debrief the course afterward with leaders who design all flag officer development efforts, and make adjustments based on input from these processes. In this sense, we continuously modify, amend and improve the program dynamically and in tandem with changing and evolving needs."

- Professor Jared Harris, Samuel L. Slover Research Chair and Associate Professor of Business Administration, UVA Darden

A Covid Bubble

UVA Darden remained committed to delivering NST face-to-face to senior officers in 2020 despite the lockdowns and difficulties imposed by Covid-19. Working with faculty and Naval commissioning officers, the UVA Darden program team was able to ensure that learning could continue uninterrupted on campus throughout the pandemic. Through strong partnership, Darden was able to implement appropriately stringent measures and processes were adopted to protect the health and safety of everyone, and evolve the delivery modalities to preserve the efficacy of the learning. Through the entire pandemic, cohorts ultimately experienced only two reported cases of the virus.

"The Navy really saw the power of learning in person. During Covid, we worked together in close partnership to find and isolate our program delivery venues and hotels to preserve the mission-critical in-person element. We were determined to find the safest ways to keep education going despite the enormous difficulties we were all facing. The fact that we kept going, educating several hundred people despite the pandemic, with no outbreaks of the virus — I think that speaks volumes about the strength of our strategic and operational partnership with the Navy."

- Devin Bigoness



The U.S. Navy Strategic Thinking program is a rich and rigorous learning experience that accelerates strategic thinking and execution capabilities at the highest level of command across the Department of the Navy. Now in their 10th (non-contiguous) year of collaboration, UVA Darden and the US Navy are able to leverage their joint expertise and ongoing learning from NST to continue to roll out world-class strategic leadership training to future cohorts, with the agility and flexibility to adapt content in tandem with evolving needs and realities.

NST is the full beneficiary of the US Navy's commitment to lifelong upskilling and learning, and UVA Darden expertise in delivering world-class, bespoke learning solutions for leadership development.

To date, the NST program has welcomed and transformed the strategic thinking capabilities of 640 participants.

The U.S. NST program is destined to remain a flagship resource and core tool in the Navy's ongoing commitment to building the capabilities and the resilience of its key decision-makers for a VUCA future operational environment.

“This program is a really unique opportunity to get away from the job setting and to experience learning and networking at an incredible level. It’s an opportunity to share your story and impact your colleagues—to think really deeply about things and have the courage to try new approaches. This is learning experience that teaches you to think strategically; to look up and around you and see the opportunities that are out there, and to build the competencies to do things differently. It’s an opportunity to change the strategy of the organization for the better.”

- Rear Admiral CJ Jaynes (retired), the Naval Air Systems Command's (NAVAIR) first woman flag officer, as well as the first woman aerospace maintenance duty officer to achieve flag officer rank



UVA Darden is entering into our sixth decade collaborating with Military and Government programs specifically with the US Navy.

For over 50 years, Darden has provided expertise designed to solve the business challenges of some of the nation's largest military and government agencies. Darden's top-ranked faculty and client solutions directors have built long-standing relationships with every branch of the U.S. military and many federal agencies, providing the knowledge and experience to apply business and leadership insights within the context of military and government mission requirements. Our partnership programs:

- Equip participants with the ability to think strategically and globally
- Create diverse and inclusive organizations
- Proactively respond to new environments that require innovative thinking

We Work With



To find out more about the custom and customized learning solutions that we offer at UVA Darden Executive Education and Lifelong Learning, please head to:
darden.virginia.edu/executive-education

And contact our team at:
Darden_Exed@darden.virginia.edu
+1-877-833-3974 U.S./Canada | +1-434-924-3000 Worldwide

 **UVA DARDEN**
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING

Provided by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation