

UMUC Business and Executive Programs Podcasts

Executive CIO Education in Global World

Interviewer: Pat Spencer, Manager of the Executive Programs Online Team Coaching Program

Interviewee: Monica Fitzgerald, Director of CIO University

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Spencer: Welcome to Executive CIO Education in the Global World, a weekly podcast that features highlights of the Executive Chief Information Officer Program and discussion of how the program prepares executives for technology leadership in today's global business environment. I'm Pat Spencer, Manager of the Executive Programs Online Team Coaching Program, your host for the day.

Our guest today is Monica Fitzgerald, who is director of CIO University, which is a program of the Federal CIO Council managed by the General Services Administration. The topic for today's show is the CIO Certificate From a CIO University Perspective. We will be discussing how the Certificate Program is viewed by the organization which administers it. Monica, would you first tell us about the CIO University?

Fitzgerald: Pat, thank you so much for inviting me to speak today. I'm delighted to speak to anyone listening to this podcast who is looking at the University of Maryland University College's program.

CIO University in a way is a bit of a misnomer. Sometimes people think that the government has a big sprawling campus somewhere where we offer courses and students take them and get a degree of some sort. But in reality, what it is is that the Federal Government and the Federal CIO Council, specifically, had a challenge about 10 years ago. Because of some legislation called Clinger-Cohen legislation, there was a blueprint laid out that said, we want people who are going to become Federal Chief Information Officers to learn very specific things – competencies, learning objectives. And the government was faced with this thought of should we stand up our own university, or should we do something new that hadn't been done really before, which was to work together with universities that are out there doing tremendous work already, teaching great Masters Information Technologies programs, and see if those schools would agree to teach to these very specific competencies. And if so, students who attended those schools, like yours, would get, in addition to their certificate or degree from the school, would get from the Federal CIO Council, a certificate that's called a Federal CIO Certificate in Executive Competencies.

And that's exactly what has unfolded in the past 10 years. I'd also point people to look on the CIO.gov website, there's a link right there for CIO University with a lot more information about it.

Spencer: Monica, thank you for clarifying the successful collaboration between the academic world and the CIO University. Of what value is a CIO Certificate to someone who aspires to work within the Federal Government?

Fitzgerald: Well, you know it's interesting. We're not a degree-granting institution. When people do go through one of these programs, and in addition receive this Federal CIO University Certificate, if they're applying for jobs specifically in the Federal Government, because it's such a well-known program here within the Federal CIO community, as people see that indicated on folks', peoples' resumes as they're coming in applying for jobs, it says something very specific to those

prospective employers. It says ah-ha, I know that this student is grounded in some very specific competencies. They have common language, they were taught to a very rigid set of topic area of policy and organization, leadership management, process and change management, on and on with acquisition and IT project management, program management and so on. So in other words, as a person is applying for a job in the Federal Government, they're never going to see a position description that says, the only way you can apply for this is if you have this CIO University Certificate. However, that being said, as they move forward in the process, it really is sending a very strong message to that prospective employer, wow, I know more about this person than I do perhaps about some of these folks, and I think that gives people a real leg up. And we've started to see that more and more, people who have graduated -- and we've actually had over 1,000 people over the past 10 years from our six partner schools that have gone through these programs, taught to these very specific competencies which we update every two years, and entering the workforce. And they're now in positions as Federal Chief Information Officers and also Deputies and other roles within a CIO organization.

I'd also add that in addition to federal folks, people who get this certificate don't have to be federal employees. Our graduates come from all different kinds of backgrounds.

Spencer: You've helped our listeners appreciate the value of the CIO Certificate. Thank you. How does the CIO University administer and help develop the CIO Certificate Program and what role does the CIO Council play?

Fitzgerald: We like to say that the Federal CIO Council -- and for those who aren't familiar with the Council, each agency has a person in that key leadership role and they have a head at the table in their organization. They're really overseeing the vast empire of information technology not only in their agency, but as a Council coming together and looking broadly across the entire Federal Government. The schools that we have, again, our partner institutions, agree to teach to these very specific competencies, so it's a win-win situation for both the government and for the schools like yours. And then we're very happy about the fact that the experts -- these wonderful professors that are out there teaching information technology -- are again, teaching to some very specific things.

The other thing is that the schools themselves have a great deal of flexibility in how they want to administer their program. We do not, as the government, micromanage how they're going to do that. I'll give you a great example from UMUC, I know that a few years ago you all initiated this really wonderful way that -- it was kind of a hybrid of people taking courses in person, but also that they were able to do some very good distance learning options. And I think you have people serving on ships in the Gulf and all over the world who are able to actually actively engage and be a part of a cohort of students in a particular class. That's a neat thing and not all of the six partner schools that we have do that, so I would say that the Federal CIO Council laid out a structure. You all go ahead and do that in a way that makes best sense for you.

And then from my end, sort of administering the program here at GSA, I've got some wonderful points of contact in each of my six schools, including Jane Goldberg, who if you all don't know her yet, you should, she's wonderful at her job. And she makes sure that she knows who has completed what they need to do to be awarded this certificate. Her counterparts send me that information and then I run a graduation program. It's brilliantly conceived that it's very low cost on the part of the government.

Spencer: I liked your phrase "vast empire of knowledge" and so managing that vast empire is important.

Would you please help our listeners, Monica, understand how the CIO Certificate has changed over time?

Fitzgerald: When this program originally started about 10 years ago, there was a thought at that time that I think that the government would maybe perhaps more micromanage certain things like we should only have people get this degree who are at a certain level in their careers -- in the Federal Government, that would be at a high GS level at say a 14 or a 15, or that a person has certain number of years of experience behind them in their jobs in industry. And then they would then become eligible to get this certificate. And what we learned over time, within a couple of years was, that wasn't really necessary to play that role. So one big change is that we realized, if you've been accepted into this program at one of these fine schools and you go through this rigorous program, you are certainly eligible to receive this CIO University Certificate. So that's a change, and I think that was a very good change.

We also have some other – in the very beginning the thought was, wow, there are so many information technology people here in the DC area – we're based in Washington with my agency, the Federal CIO Council, that there was a requirement at that time that the schools that were our partners all had to have a presence in Washington, DC. That was really important then. And over time we've certainly come to recognize, wow, there are students everywhere, not only around the country, but around the world, in these programs. And like I mentioned, your distance learning option and some other things that are going on, that we decided that wasn't necessarily going to be a limitation.

We've seen one change that's a really positive thing. As you know, people who are Chief Information Officers, they're really focused on the business side of information technology. They learn enough about everything in all the areas that they can understand what's happening in the organization and really be a visionary, a leader, but more and more we've seen that business acumen is extremely important and so within the schools, like yours, more and more of the way that the programs are structured is that students are taking business classes as a part of what they're doing to complete the requirements for this. And so I think that's been a very positive change of a much stronger integration of business and information technology, which is critical.

Spencer: CIO University has really opened doors for students everywhere and UMUC is proud of its role in assisting in that venture. Finally, Monica, what are the main challenges facing a Chief Information Officer in the Federal Government today?

Fitzgerald: That's a very interesting question. I myself am not a Chief Information Officer, but I have a great opportunity in my work here to interact pretty regularly with Federal CIOs around the government. And I would have to say that one of the greatest challenges is the speed at which everything is happening all the time. Technological innovations are coming in and so quickly have to be evaluated. This ability to collaborate, not just be kind of pigeonholed or stuck within your own agency, but really looking more broadly. People are more and more becoming familiar with terms like virtualization of servers or cloud computing. And it is pretty fascinating to see how the CIOs are really trying to really best understand what is the vision from the highest levels, from the White House, and we have a new Federal Chief Information Officer, Vivek Kundra, who just recently in the past month or so became the Chief Information Officer with the change in administration. And I think it's just a very exciting time in terms of challenges as a CIO to figure out how can I best get involved in these things and how can I best make sure that my agency is doing the smartest thing that it can be doing and if that includes collaboration, that's – it takes work, but it's certainly well worth the work.

Also, the Web 2.0 technologies that are coming in, how does the government effectively use, gosh, Facebook or Twitter or thinking about using these kinds of technologies for the government to better its mission of serving citizens is really great, but how does a person who is in that role of like, the buck stops here with me, I'm the Chief Information Officer here – how are you making sure security is being met? So I think that the collaboration is something that I think that people learn a lot about a lot of different things as they go through these Masters Information Technology Programs, but probably the most important thing is, how do you really collaborate? And I know that some of the programs that your school does and some others, really give people an opportunity to do a lot of team-related things. And because students in your program come not only from the Federal Government, but from industry and nonprofits, I think we've seen more and more that we don't live in a vacuum. It's really important to be sharing ideas.

The tenure of Chief Information Officers has typically been pretty short. I think the latest GAO report, it's a couple years old now, actually talked a lot about how a real challenge was that the average tenure was between three and five years, or actually so the median tenure of about two years. And it's kind of hard to step in and learn everything you need to know at an agency and then suddenly now you're going into a different job. So I think that that's a challenge and it's being addressed. I think there's a recognition that people in leadership roles probably need a bit longer time. That doesn't mean that people who are coming up behind them are never going to get into those jobs – it's certainly not the case.

And I also wanted to point out that when we talked before about some of the people who've come into the Federal CIO role, the Chief Information Officer at Department of Commerce in recent years was Barry West, who I know is a graduate of your school's program. I believe he's even an adjunct professor now in addition to all the other things he's doing. And I think that just speaks really well of the fact that not only are students able to learn the technical things that they need to know, it's a great opportunity to make connections with people who are in government or have been in government and I think those are great steppingstones for social networking and trying to get into the kinds of jobs that you want. I hope that answered your questions.

Spencer: You've answered it extremely well and have pointed out not only the advantages, but the exciting opportunities that earning a CIO Certificate brings to each individual.

Fitzgerald: I wish the best of luck to anyone who is considering attending UMUC's program, it's wonderful, I'll say that. And I think that there's some real strong advantages over other institutions.

Spencer: This is Pat Spencer, and again, I'd like to thank you, Monica Fitzgerald, for helping us understand the Chief Information Officer Certificate Program and its importance. Thank you listeners for joining Executive Education in the Global World.

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