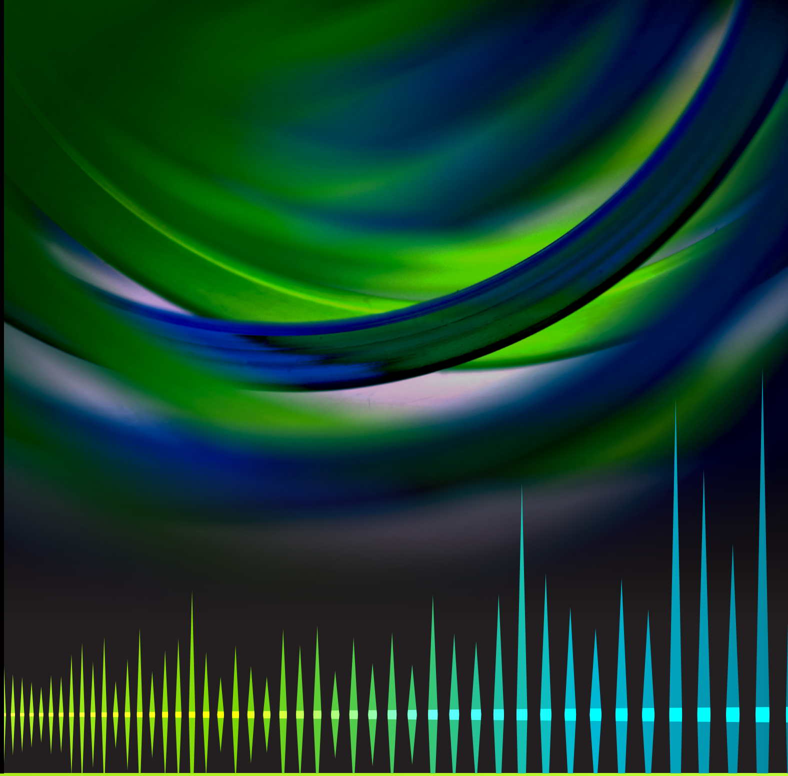
Guidehouse®



ALL THINGS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Shaping the future of defense financial management

With Tom Constable, Director of Defense Programs, Syracuse University

SDFM Society of Defense Financial Management

Welcome to the All Things Financial Management Podcast, presented by Guidehouse and the Society of Defense Financial Management. I'm your host for today's episode, Angel Wang. Join us as we discuss top-of-mind issues facing defense financial managers.

ANGEL WANG: I'm very excited to welcome our guest today, Mr. Tom Constable, Director of Defense Programs at Syracuse University. Welcome to the podcast, Tom.

TOM CONSTABLE: Angel, thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to be here. I'm a fan of the podcast and I look forward to our conversation today.

ANGEL WANG: Awesome. Well, thank you so much again. We have an exciting agenda lined up, so I'll throw it at you right now. So, Tom, you have a great, unique perspective and background within the Department and now as the Director of Defense Programs at Syracuse University. Can you tell us about your background and what brought you to your current position and what's really your story that cuts across over the years?

TOM CONSTABLE: Yeah! Thanks for asking. So, like many people in the business, I started by joining the military and I thought I would stick around for a few years and take the college money and go back and do something else. But I really enjoyed what I saw. And as I progressed through and saw more of the Army, I went to Officer Candidate School, so I did that. And I was a field artillery officer for a while, and this has nothing to do with financial management. But when I was a financial manager, I happened to share a hallway with an old resource manager, a garrison resource manager at Fort Sill, who used to tell me stories of being a financial manager. And he told me about this program at Syracuse University, and I thought it was interesting. So, when I had a chance to select a functional area in the Army, I saw comptroller and I remembered what he had told me and I thought that would be good.

So off I went to the Syracuse University Defense Comptrollership Program, the one that is now part of what I lead here at the university, and my eyes were opened to financial management and I loved it and I took everything I could from it. And from there, it was to the Pentagon and I felt more at home than I had felt certainly anywhere up to that point. And then so I stayed there and I retired from the Army in 2008, but I stayed on, I was doing programming at the time, and I found that really interesting. But while I was doing programming, I had really, really good mentors and bosses around me. I remember a woman, Nancy, coming down the hall one day saying, "You're coming with me." And she literally took my ear, but she was being funny and she sat me down and she said, "This is the budget book. When you program things and you don't tell me these things, here's what I have to do to figure it out."

And my eyes were opened again and I thought, "Boy, this is amazing. It's all one story." So the vision of planning, programming, budgeting, and execution all started coming together for me. So as I had been building POMs, suddenly I had an understanding now of what setting up a year for execution looked like and then what the impacts were to the organizations when I did things especially well on their behalf or if I just sort of made them a lower priority or something, how much that could hurt them. So I really felt like I had a good foundation from the Army staff in how to view the total end-to-end process that goes from requirements, generation, and justification all the way through expenditure of funds and even audit.

So that brought me here from the Army staff. I had an opportunity to go to the OSD Comptroller staff and I couldn't say yes fast enough because the notion of looking at things beyond the Army was really interesting to me and it was everything I hoped it would be. I started working defense-wide accounts. So, I became aware of the fourth estate and all of the similarities and differences between those 26 agencies at the time. And again, a nice opportunity to learn a lot just because there was a lot of data out there from these different budget shops that fed into OSD Comptroller. And then from there, I took a G8 job overseas for a few years. I was the G8 over at US Army Africa. Fascinating. I always tell the students now, if you have a chance to be a G8, I highly recommend it because seldom do you get the opportunity to have the whole range of PPBE under one roof and it's your roof. So it was really nice to support US Army Africa as the G8.

When I came back from there, I became a senior executive and I worked again in comptroller doing military operations, so all the O&M for the military services. But not too long after that, I had a chance to go do something different, and that was to use the resource skills that I had picked up doing readiness accounts, working closely with CAPE and with personnel readiness over in Undersecretary P&R and the folks over at OMB. And we had a lot of good readiness discussions. So when the ASD Readiness at the time asked if I would come be her principal deputy, I was very happy to do that. And so I served as Principal Deputy Undersecretary for Readiness. Of course, as we do, she shortly left, or left shortly thereafter, rather. And so I was the Acting ASD for Readiness.

And then my final job in the Department before my retirement from civil service was as the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, and that's a whole other podcast, just a broad portfolio of requirements and capabilities. Things like the commissaries and the DoDEA schools all fell within that purview. But through it all, had I not had the resource management skills that I had learned all the way back at Syracuse, all the way through all those budget and programming jobs, I don't think I'd have been as effective in decision making and decision informing to my higher, to the senior leaders. I really think the basis in financial management really sets us up nicely to do CEO work, not just CFO work. I'll stop there.

ANGEL WANG: It's a great perspective, Tom. And I think giving an appreciation of financial management really does lead the way for understanding, at the end of the day, how your operations work, what levers you can pull. I think that is super fascinating. And I think, in your role now within Syracuse University and ushering in the next generation of financial management leaders, I would be curious to see, from your perspective, how do you see the role of defense financial managers evolving over the next 10 years, and what role do you think continuing education plays in that evolution?

TOM CONSTABLE: I think the financial management of the future comes up quite a bit. It did five years ago, too, before most of the defining characteristics of the field even existed. We were talking about what is the future of the financial manager. And I think the future's really bright, for one thing, because what I think I see is the financial managers, one, being more understood in terms of the value they provide an organization, and I think they're going to be more included in senior leadership decision-making processes, not just a feeder with financial data or another vote at the table or person in the room. I think the roles associated generally with operations of an organization, be that a directorate, be that a military organization or a secretariat, I think it's going to be better understood that when you start looking at the data first, it's in everybody's best interest to have the financial manager at the table from the beginning.

So I think the future's bright. I think we're going to see more standing within the operational community with an understanding that executing the funds that produce the capabilities we're trying to produce is just made better when the financial managers are more a part of the process earlier on. So I think we'll see more of that. And I think that means financial managers are going to have to probably consider new skills just to keep up with the diversity of decision-making that happens all the way from planning through execution, through audit.

I think the role of continuing education should be evident, but education doesn't mean coming to Syracuse for DCP, although I highly recommend it. It means learning something every single day. The beauty of the jobs I had along the way is I can honestly say I learned something, I have to say, every day. I took challenging jobs because they were available and I had the opportunity to do that, but I think every job gives us an opportunity to learn something, and most of the learning, I maintain, 90% of what we learn, comes from other people.

It comes from working side by side with other people, listening to them, being incredibly inquisitive about what's going on around you and how you might influence it. I think that makes a difference. So to that end, I think continued learning is, that's an absolute essential. As for education and training, by which I mean classroom, hands-on sometimes, more theoretical sometimes if you're in graduate school or something, I think those things are still at least as important because we will never see a time where better thinking skills and better writing skills and better communication skills are not a premium for our field.

ANGEL WANG: I really appreciate that holistic view. I think based on your first answer, where you talked about the need to almost think and function like a CEO and having agency over your portfolio, your book of business, and understanding how your decisions not just impact what you do, but also maybe the broader context and the broader mission that you are supporting. And I just really appreciate the call for continued curiosity and collaboration. I think regardless of what types of technology and tools are coming available and accessible, those things, those traits, do not get replaced and are not replaceable by, let's say, the coolest and most modern artificial intelligence models. So I think those two traits are still very, very much high-value and high-demand.

I think I want to ask one last question of you, Tom. So you've mentored probably, at this point, hundreds of professionals throughout your dedicated service across Department of War over the years and now through your Syracuse programs. Are there a couple of specific success stories of a former student that still makes you proud when you see their name in the news or on a promotion list? Can you describe that feeling and also talk about some of the impact that they're making in their fields?

TOM CONSTABLE: Wow, there are so many great people in our field and, honestly, I take their success really personally because I believe in people. And the ones that do sort of identify themselves as the ones that really want to understand something, really want to be a part of it, the ones that show up to the meetings uninvited like I used to do, those are sort of my people. So I watch them, and I don't know if you want me to name names, but there are people. It's always a really happy feeling when somebody thanks you in their first SES induction speech. You think, well, gosh, it didn't occur to me at the time that's what we were doing, but I'm super pleased that these people that fought so hard and worked so hard to get to the senior executive ranks, to the key decision-making roles, I'm glad to know that whatever we did together helped them learn to get there. And I'm always happy to see those people in those roles because that bodes well for the organization and for the field of financial management.

So I'm really happy to see. I look across OSD Comptroller now, and I look at who's running the place, and they're just some of the smartest people. It's just insane. Some young, some in their 30s are senior executives, and I just think, gosh, those people just have the world by the tail, whether they know it or not. Probably, they're mostly thinking, "Wow, I'm really busy because I work at OSD Comptroller." But if they could stand back for a second, they should be really proud that they are in a position that they could have walked away from, that they worked extra hard to get to, and whether they'll say it or not, they did it so that they could make a difference. And that makes me really, really proud to be a part of their little orbit in any way I can. So yeah, there are a lot of people I've worked with, for, and around over the years that I am extremely proud to associate myself with.

I think I chanced into the right field when I met that financial manager down the hall as an artilleryman, right?

ANGEL WANG: That's wonderful. And I do echo that, and I see so many amazing and exceptional leaders, especially through our financial management community across all departments, services, components. It's incredible to see the pace of change and just the talent that's reflected to usher in that new era of change and efficiency and transformation.

So Tom, I want to thank you again for carving out a little bit of time today to share your perspectives on some of the most profound changes happening within and across the Department of War and how defense programs at Syracuse are evolving to meet those needs and some of the skill sets that are continuously in demand and will never go away or be replaced by any sort of technology. So I'll turn it over to you for any closing remarks that you have.

TOM CONSTABLE: Thanks again, Angel. First of all, thanks again for having me today. I'm such a fan of yours and of all the work that you do. And so to be on a podcast with you on behalf of SDFM, and then Guidehouse, is just a real honor. There are a couple things. One, you said something about the pace of change: faster than it's ever been. A wise new friend of mine recently told me something that gave me pause because I guess I hadn't heard it before, but we say the pace of change is faster than it's ever been before, but I'd never heard the corollary, and that is, "and slower than it will ever be again," because that made me think, and I thought it was great because it puts us in a place when we think, wow, the pace of change, as fast as it seems now, it's not going to slow down again.

There's no reversal on this machine. It's going faster. So go ahead and get over it and figure out what kind of thought processes and mental processes you're going to put into place to manage the fact that the thing that comes out the other end of this process you're doing is probably going to be different from what you thought it was going to be when you started the process. So that's a really important point, I think, that was made by one of our colleagues.

The other thing I heard that I think is my new favorite sort of trope, if you will, is I heard a teacher, Helen Thomas, for those who don't know, teaches CDFM. She runs a CDFM study group on YouTube. You've got to check her out, Helen Thomas. And Helen was recognized by SDFM last year as just an outstanding community member and leader, but she said something to our students when she came up to talk to them. I thought, yes, that's right. And that is when you're studying, when you're learning, when you're doing all of these things, you should just be able to have a conversation about them. You have to put the pieces together. So I think my new favorite way of learning that I want to talk more about as I go forward, I got to do some reading here, but it's simply the ability to put the pieces together. I've always said, when you make a decision in an organization, it's affecting all the other ones because it's not that big a universe. You got to make sure you know the whole story because it's one story. The unified theory of financial management and military operations, I guess. But what Helen said, you should be able to have a conversation about this. You should talk about it. I thought, that's right. When we talk about things together, I think instead of trying to memorize facts, instead of trying to pull down the latest data in all of these very incremental steps, take a deep breath, find friends in the field, and a great place to do this, an unpaid, uncompensated promotion here, is a PDI or a DFMI, any SDFM event where financial managers gather. Grab a few of them, sit down, have a cup of coffee, have a cocktail, whatever it is you're doing, talk about financial management for a while, just talk about things.

And it's amazing what comes out and how many details you learn and the nuances you pick up. So those are the two things I really wanted to say today in the course of our discussion. I think it's important that we become conversant in our craft, be unapologetically enthusiastic and passionate about what we do, and then think about how we can use this huge set of skills that we have and this bastion of new technology at our fingertips, get over all of it, and figure out how we can put it all to work to make better outcomes for the Department and the community we serve.

Thank you for tuning into All Things Financial Management, an SDFM podcast series sponsored by Guidehouse. You can find all our episodes at **SDFM.org** and at **All Things Financial Management**. Thank you.

This podcast was edited by Resonate Recordings.