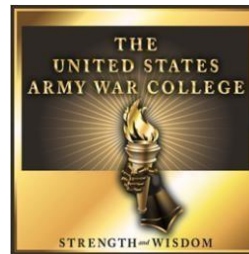


## Air Force Officer Personnel Management Needs a 21st Century Revolution

by

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United States Army War College  
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## Abstract

The current Air Force officer personnel management system has not been significantly updated since the service's inception in 1947. Driving the need for personnel management improvements are changing military-family dynamics, expectations from today's millennial generation, and a growing civil-military gap. Keeping the status quo ultimately risks talent retention. The Air Force is aware and already working on overhauling performance reports, officer stratifications, and promotions. This research focuses on areas that are not being overhauled, namely the officer assignment system and professional military education. Through this analysis, opportunities emerge for the system to not only be more responsive to officers' and their family's preferences, but to also develop officers who are more cognitively diverse. In doing so, officers will improve their problem-solving skills and ultimately provide better outcomes. The paper first recommends developing a new market based assignment system where the affected members and the gaining commanders have more input than they do today. The second recommendation proposes more opportunities for mid-career officers to attend civilian graduate programs in lieu of Air Command and Staff College. While these recommendations are responsive to the external environment, the ultimate goal is to improve talent retention and produce better outcomes.

## **Air Force Officer Personnel Management Needs a 21st Century Revolution**

The mission of the United States (U.S.) Air Force is to “fly, fight, and win in air, space, and cyberspace.”<sup>1</sup> Winning in today’s dynamic, interconnected, and increasingly volatile environment requires agility, innovation, and continuous adjustments. To keep pace with these changes, an Air Force (AF) powered by airmen needs to modernize its antiquated officer personnel management system. Since the AF’s inception in 1947, the external environment has evolved, while the officer personnel management system remains largely unchanged. This has resulted in a system that is unresponsive to officer’s preferences and develops too many like-minded leaders. The ultimate consequence is an inability to retain the proper talent.

This paper explores this inference by first providing a background of personnel management challenges and leadership’s ongoing efforts to address them. Next, the current state of the assignment process and developmental education systems are described in order to provide a baseline of the systems this paper seeks to improve. Then, it reviews changes in the strategic environment that are relevant to the personnel management system. The changes include military-family dynamics, millennial’s expectations, and a growing civil-military gap. What emerges are the limitations and frustrations of an antiquated system that is both unresponsive to officer’s preferences and that struggles to develop diverse officers. Finally, the paper explores the status quo consequence to talent retention and offers two recommendations that will modernize both the assignment and developmental education systems and result in improved officer talent retention.

Driving the need for these improvements is a shrinking U.S. military comparative advantage, a fiscally constrained and uncertain operating environment, and a strong

demand for the skills officers possess. Changes to the officer personnel management system are not only overdue, but necessary for the AF to continue to fly, fight, and, win in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Background

Last year in one of the AF's largest wings, five officers were selected to attend in-residence professional military education (PME). This selection put these officers in the top 20 percent of AF Majors.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, four of the five officers declined PME and instead opted to separate from the AF. The four officers who declined school all had similar reasons for their decisions. Primarily, their decision was made for personal reasons, as their families wanted more input in their assignments and also wanted more stability. Each of the officers started the PME volunteer process knowing they might decline the assignment, but held out hope that they would get one of their top three choices. When they did not, they declined going to school and under 2015 policies were forced to separate. This one example shows a loss of AF-identified talent, an inflexible system where officers must either accept the assignment or leave the AF, and in their case, an aversion to moving one's family for a one-year assignment at a military school that is accompanied by an additional three-year payback of additional service. While this example speaks of an inflexible system, other officers are frustrated that the system does not best utilize their talents.

In recent testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on reforming the military personnel system, an analyst from the RAND Corporation captured the sentiments of many officers when he stated, "The services force them into assignments that they do not think make appropriate use of their talents."<sup>3</sup> Critics argue that the

system fails to recognize individual attributes and fails to take into account personal preferences.<sup>4</sup>

The AF's Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Lieutenant General Gina Grosso is both aware and working on improving the system.

According to Grosso, many people are happy where they are but have to move when they get promoted. In the future, Grosso hopes that system can be improved upon as well. The Air Force must increase attraction and retain talent in order to meet the challenges of the future, Grosso added. Talent management is about more than numbers; it's about what is gained as an organization with diversity of thought and experience.<sup>5</sup>

Lieutenant General Grosso also announced in the fall of 2016 that the AF is overhauling performance reports, officer stratifications, and promotions.<sup>6</sup> The overhaul does not include the officer assignment system nor the developmental education system. For this reason, this paper will address these topics in order to fill the gap and offer recommendations. What follows is a description of the current officer assignment system and the current developmental education system.

#### Current Officer Assignment System

The AF's assignment system for junior and mid-career officers is managed by Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC). While the process differs slightly depending on the officer's specialty, AFPC centrally manages all assignments until an officer becomes a Colonel. An officer is vulnerable to move just prior to reaching three-years' time on station. According to AFPC, the priorities for assignments are needs of the AF, officer professional development, functional priorities like unit manning, and lastly, member's desires. Outside of the normal process are special considerations for dual military-spouse assignments, humanitarian assignments, and exceptional family member assignments. Every officer is encouraged to maintain an updated or current Airman

Development Plan (ADP) on file. The ADP is the communication tool that gives an airman the ability to identify their rank-ordered preferences, including assignment type and location. The ADP also gives the airman and their commander a place to provide narrative inputs. Consider the following example for a typical flying squadron.

Early in an assignment process, AFPC assesses vacancies across the AF. These vacancies become “bills” that will eventually be sent to squadrons to “pay.” The amount of assignment bills a squadron receives depends largely on their own manning. An overmanned unit will receive more bills, and an undermanned unit will receive less. Most of the time, the bills do not come down with a specific officer in mind as AFPC tries to defer that consideration to the losing commander. The losing commander has latitude on whom to offer for the assignment, but must pick only from eligible officers while being prepared to justify not selecting members with the most time on station. In this process, the gaining commander gets little to no input on who will fill the assignment. The affected officer voices their preferences with their commander. The entire process involves trust and communication. For example, if a commander has a pilot who strongly desires any assignment at a particular geographic location, AFPC will work with the commander in an attempt to include that location in the assignment bills.

Still, this system is particularly unresponsive to officer’s preferences. Despite having a current ADP with a rank-ordered list of preferences and open communication with one’s commander, an officer with high time on station is at the mercy of the quantity and type of assignments that are billed to their unit. This may be as few as one assignment bill or as many as ten. In a typical cycle, low demand assignments like air-liaison officers and unmanned aerial system operators are billed and must be filled first.

Mid-demand assignments, such as instructors for pilot training are billed next. Finally, high demand assignments, such as staying in their current weapon system or flying DV airlift are billed last. While there are hundreds of assignments billed to the community at large, the departing officer and their commander typically only have a few to choose from. Under most conditions, the system gives minimal consideration to the affected officer, its family, and the gaining commander. The officer developmental education system does a better job of incorporating officer's preferences, but there are still high density low-demand programs.

#### Current Developmental Education

Each year the AF sends approximately 675 Majors to intermediate developmental education. These in-resident programs are typically one year and accompanied by a three-year pay back. These competitively selected programs include military colleges, internships, fellowships, cadet commands, and international exchanges to list a few. The most common program for officers is Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), where approximately 275 officers attend each year. These officers are in the top third of their year group and most commonly move to a military staff following PME. A typical completion requirement is authoring a 5,000-word paper in addition to the unique program requirements. Those officers not attending a military school are required to complete the AF's ACSC online via distant learning. All of this is the same for senior PME, but the total number of officers selected each year is fewer. Attendance in a resident PME program increases an officer's chance for promotion and higher command opportunities. Taking an emerging leader with technical expertise out of operations for a year to further their education is a significant investment the AF makes in both time and money.



Both the current assignment system and developmental education programs have the potential to impact talent retention. These legacy programs are part of an outdated personnel management system that is impacted by increasing external environmental pressures.

### Evolving External Environment

The external environment is making the personnel management challenge more difficult. Changing family dynamics, the millennial generation, and a growing civil-military divide are applying pressure to the outdated personnel management system.

### Changing Family Demographics

One of the largest influences in an officer's decision to stay in the service or separate comes from their spouse and immediate family. A 1987 *Army Research Institute* report showed a consistent relationship between the spouse's support for a military career and the military member's decision to stay or separate.<sup>7</sup> The amount that family factors like deployments, family separation, pay, retirements and job satisfaction play in influencing the retention decision depends on the "family life cycle" and the member's "career life cycle" stage.<sup>8</sup> While this research report targeted Army families, the family factors of deployments, family separation, pay, retirements, and job satisfaction affect AF families as well. This dynamic impacts the 92% of mid-career AF officers who have families.<sup>9</sup> Balancing the demands of a military career and family life are even more challenging for those families where both spouses work either as dual military couples or military and non-military couples. For AF officers, 41% of families are in the situation where both spouses work.<sup>10</sup> Managing two careers is tough for any couple, but even tougher for military families who move every one-to-three years and often deploy or train away from home for months at a time. Those military families who

are able to balance dual careers often find that the non-military member is disadvantaged in pursuing his or her own career in multiple ways. First, spouses of military members earn somewhere between 20-29% less than their non-military counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, while civilians find themselves in a job where their skills and education are a mismatch only 10% of the time, military spouses have a 40% mismatch-rate.<sup>12</sup> Finally, a recent study showed that 90% of female military spouses are either unemployed or underemployed.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, spouses are typically paid less, in positions their skills are a mismatch for, and face higher rates of unemployment.

These income and employment disadvantages are in addition to the unique military challenges of frequent travel, relocation and family separation. Since a military member's decision to stay in or separate is often tied to their family's happiness, the AF needs a personnel management system that is responsive and tailored to these challenges.<sup>14</sup> There exists a demand for longer assignments, homesteading, and dual-track careers to address the challenges of balancing a family while serving in the military. Thus far, the AF's personnel management system has not evolved to address the challenges. The next external environmental pressure that the current personnel management system inadequately addresses is the preferences of the millennial generation.

### Millennials

The current environment includes a new generation of emerging leaders that offers both promises and new challenges. Millennials (anyone born after 1982) are currently Lieutenants, Captains, and Majors.<sup>15</sup> Millennial traits generally include a fondness for digital technology and social media, finding meaningful and collaborative work, better work-life balance, more frequent job changes, valuing diversity, craving

feedback, and questioning why things are done a certain way.<sup>16</sup> This group entered military service after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, grew up in the digital revolution, are more welcoming of social changes, and are greatly informed by the 2008 financial collapse.<sup>17</sup>

An author from *The Atlantic* stated that:

Millennials value personal life and family above paychecks. They value diverse work experiences, increased higher education opportunities, and the ability to change jobs often. They want a bigger say in their career paths and their future, and value higher education. They see themselves as likely to leave jobs, companies, and career fields at a much higher rate than their predecessors.<sup>18</sup>

These values require a personnel management system that is more responsive to the needs of the millennials.

A challenge for the military is that millennials typically dislike hierarchal organizations that are inflexible. The good news for the military is that millennials favor public service more than previous generations. These opportunities and challenges regarding millennials should not be viewed with value judgments. Rather, the personnel management system needs to keep up with millennials' expectations. Another environmental change is a growing American civil-military divide that is fraught with undesirable outcomes.

### Civil-Military Gap

As fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military, the risk becomes a disconnect between the military and society. Secretary of Defense Gates once noted, "military service has become something for other people to do."<sup>19</sup> Today, less than one percent of Americans serve in the military and often times do not know anyone who serves.<sup>20</sup> This gap leads to a mindset where Americans love troops for the valor and

bravery they represent, but “would rather not think about them.”<sup>21</sup> The consequence to this growing gap is significant.

A society vastly comprised of those who have not served in the military is more likely to go to war, as they do not personally lose when troops die.<sup>22</sup> A writer from *The Atlantic* described it this way: “The American public and its political leadership will do anything for the military except take it seriously. The result is a chickenhawk nation in which careless spending and strategic folly combine to lure America into endless wars it can’t win.”<sup>23</sup>

Today’s long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has cost America between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion over the past 15 years, and despite an overwhelming military advantage, strategic ends still have not yet been achieved.<sup>24</sup> It is worth wondering what would be different if Congress fulfilled its constitutional obligation to declare war.<sup>25</sup> It is perplexing and likely indicative of the growing civil-military that American citizens do not even demand a formal war-declaration vote. One possible explanation is the admiration Americans have for the military as America’s most trusted institution.<sup>26</sup> In acknowledging this war-prone consequence from the civil-military divide, Admiral Chairman Mullen said he would sacrifice some excellence and readiness in order to stay closer to the American people.<sup>27</sup> Secretary of Defense Mattis researched the civil-military divide during his time as a member of Stanford’s Hoover Institute. His research found that the civil-military divide did not only lend itself to uninformed citizens, but those same citizens were also overwhelmingly in agreement that, “You’d need a military with different values to protect that society.”<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates that the gap is widening, as the military

should always strive to mirror the society that they serve. There is room for improvement from both civilians and the military when addressing this challenge.

The family, millennial, and civil-military environmental factors all present challenges and apply pressure to the current personnel management system. With talent retention ultimately at stake, changes in the outdated personnel management system are needed. An updated system should not only seek to retain talent, but also produce better outcomes. One way to produce better outcomes is to develop officers and teams with better problem solving skills. Developing more cognitively diverse teams is a good place to start, and holds promise for better outcomes as well as talent retention.

#### Cognitive Diversity – An Opportunity

The challenges we face as a nation are not getting less complex, they're getting more complex," Goldfein continued. "Having a diverse group of leaders, having a diverse group of airmen that are representative of the nation, that can come together and bring those diverse backgrounds and [ways of] thinking, to provide creative solutions to some of these complex challenges is as much a warfighting imperative as it is about improving our Air Force.<sup>29</sup>

Diversity in the officer corps matters in the AF for several reasons. First, the military must always strive to represent the broader population they serve. Secondly, an officer corps less diverse than the enlisted corps results in being out of touch with those you lead. Thirdly, if diverse groups produce better outcomes, then the mission benefits with greater diversity. This broad assertion is debated by experts. This paper will narrow diversity's benefits to problem solving and prediction, while acknowledging the potential friction that can accompany diversity. While the word diversity typically connotes a person's identity traits of race, ethnicity, or gender, this paper will instead focus on

thought or cognitive diversity. General Patton once said, “If everybody is thinking alike, then somebody isn’t thinking.”<sup>30</sup>

The value in diversity is derived from an individual’s unique set of backgrounds, traits and beliefs when working in groups. The benefits of diverse teams make it more likely you will reexamine the facts, question assumptions, stay objective, and become more self-aware of personal biases.<sup>31</sup> Diversity also makes a group less likely to fall victim to groupthink.<sup>32</sup> The challenges to diversity are that different backgrounds and beliefs when working in a group can often lead to conflict and if not overcome produce worse results. Research shows that diversity needs the moderating effect of trust in order to achieve better outcomes.<sup>33</sup> Trust takes time, and is something a leader must deliberately work on fostering. Without trust, groups are more likely to be ineffective either due to an inclination to avoid conflict, or the other extreme of engaging in unhealthy conflict.

Scott Page is the Leonid Hurwicz Collegiate Professor at the University of Michigan and a leading scholar and author on cognitive diversity. His work shows that cognitive diversity helps most with problem solving and prediction.<sup>34</sup> He contends that “cognitive diversity is based on the “toolbox” each one of us carries with us, built from our individual experiences and education and trainings.”<sup>35</sup> Each person’s toolbox is made up of perspectives, heuristics, interpretations, and predictive models that people constantly use to make decisions.<sup>36</sup> Everyone has these tools in different amounts and uses them in different ways. The totality of these differences when working in a group allow the group to see the problem in new and different ways, ultimately leading to better and faster solutions.<sup>37</sup> The AF is particularly susceptible to developing officers

who are not cognitively diverse. Officers attend the same schools, complete identical training, and often think alike.<sup>38</sup> This leads to a group of officers not only getting stuck, but often getting stuck in the same place. Improved cognitive diversity would not prevent officers from getting stuck, but it would be more likely that they get stuck in different places. If diversity of thought is present, others who are not stuck in the same place could step in and improve the solution.<sup>39</sup> While identity diversity inherent in race, ethnicity, age, and gender do not guarantee unique thought, there is strong evidence that these identity groups positively matter in diverse thinking.<sup>40</sup>

The AF is working on diversity as a part of their *2016 Air Force Diversity & Inclusion Initiative*. These initiatives address recruiting, hiring, promotions, improved analytics, training, deliberate planning, family considerations, and new recognition programs. One example of a new initiative is increased funding for 200 additional Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarships targeted in underrepresented population centers.<sup>41</sup> What is missing in these initiatives is more emphasis on development, where officers can become more cognitively diverse through broadening experiences and education. To enable this, the antiquated personnel management system needs modernizing. The consequences to not doing so are much more than diversity alone, as talent retention is ultimately at risk.

#### The Consequence – Risk to Talent Retention

A 2011 survey of 250 West Point graduates revealed that 93% of the time respondents believe that, “The best officers leave the military early rather than serving a full career.”<sup>42</sup> This statistic likely includes some exaggeration and cynicism regarding officer’s satisfaction with the Army, but may also highlight high corporate-world demand for the most talented military officers. This demand for military officers greatly impacts

the AF, who is competing to retain highly trained pilots with a booming airline industry that will hire 5,000 pilots this year alone.<sup>43</sup> At the end of FY16, the AF was 1,555 pilots short across all mission areas.<sup>44</sup> This is a significant portion of AF officers as pilots account for 31% of the AF's junior and mid-career officers.<sup>45</sup> The impact is felt the most in non-flying billets such as rated staff positions as the priority remains operational flying. The AF has long sought to retain pilots by offering them a bonus when their 10-year pilot training payback is complete. The problem is that more and more often, pilots are turning down the six-figure bonus, with a bonus "take-rate" now less than 50%.<sup>46</sup> This challenge demands more than just increasing throughput, raising bonuses, and levying coercive policies.

Retaining talent is difficult to measure as there are subjective elements of talent. Two articles from *The Atlantic* discussed this subjectivity and after interviewing recently separated officers, reinforced that talent retention is challenging in today's environment. The first is a piece from Tim Kane titled, *Why Our Best Officers are Leaving*. He cites feedback from veterans, frustrated by the bureaucracy, who overwhelmingly attribute talent loss to the military personnel system, a risk-adverse culture, and the assignment system.<sup>47</sup> He describes job assignments as being managed by "a faceless, centralized bureaucracy that keeps everyone guessing where they might be shipped next."<sup>48</sup>

The second article is co-authored by retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno titled, *Can the U.S. Military Halt Its Brain Drain?* He too is critical of the rigid personnel system.<sup>49</sup> He also acknowledges that identifying the reasons for talent loss is difficult as the military does not conduct exit interviews or track the quality of losses.<sup>50</sup> He focused in on the desire talented officers share in wanting to attend top graduate



school programs.<sup>51</sup> Both thought leaders used the qualitative term *best and brightest* in describing military talent.

A 2014 dissertation at the Harvard Business School took this qualitative *best and brightest* assertion and quantitatively tested it for its' impact on retention. Surprisingly, the findings contradicted the anecdotal theme of a talent retention crisis, and said "in fact, the opposite appears true, as there is evidence that 'best and brightest' West Pointers are more likely to stay in."<sup>52</sup> All of this is to demonstrate that there is no consensus in the severity of the talent retention challenge, which is not to say that talent management and retention can be ignored. In fact, the military needs to focus on this more than the private sector. The reason being is that the very top military officers take 20-40 years to develop, and with no direct entry program, a talent-loss early in an officer's career, permanently shrinks the available talent pool for the future.

For the AF, the talent retention challenge is most acute for pilots, engineers, scientists, and information technology specialists.<sup>53</sup> A 2015 doctoral dissertation of aviators who already separated found that while most service members had both positive and disappointing military experiences, their exit decision "became untenable when the participants further perceived uncontrollable conflicting family needs."<sup>54</sup> A similar conclusion was reached in a Navy study that found that "sailors are more willing to stay if the Navy can provide strong support for their families."<sup>55</sup> This again highlights the strong role of family dynamics in retention.

For non-rated career fields, the retention decision comes sooner as the service commitment payback is half that of pilots. For this group of junior AF officers, research

concludes that positive mentoring is helpful when it comes to intent to stay, as long as the mentoring is career-related and not solely focused on psychosocial functions.<sup>56</sup>

Two topics continue to emerge in those who have studied military officer retention—demand for graduate school programs and allowing the member to have more input in their assignments. A 2014 RAND study used simulation to illustrate how mid-career officer’s retention would be improved simply by having the option to attend graduate school.<sup>57</sup> The Navy *surface community* is seeing promising talent retention trends through similar graduate programs as well as one-year programs that partner with industry.<sup>58</sup> A 2010 Army study attributes their declining retention to a failure in giving officers enough say in their assignments.<sup>59</sup> This leads to the need for bold yet practical recommendations on an improved assignment system and increased civilian developmental education opportunities.

### Recommendations

An AF powered by airmen needs an updated personnel management system that is tailored to today’s environment. Such a system must continue to place the needs of the AF first, and promote a culture where officers embody the privilege of selfless service. However, the system must also evolve to address the environmental changes since its inception after World War II. The two personnel management recommendations below are tailored to achieving better outcomes by giving the officer and their families more input on their assignments, narrowing the civil-military gap, developing improved cognitive diversity, and ultimately retaining more talented AF officers. They are intentionally revolutionary, as the environment already described requires something more than just an evolutionary approach.

## Assignment System – Market Based System

This proposal recommends the AF develop a market-based assignment portal where officers apply for assignments they are interested in and eligible for. The hiring authority would be the gaining commander in coordination with the losing commander. Officers would have to meet a minimum time-on-station to apply and be required to apply after a set amount of time. It is not an entirely new proposal, as Tim Kane, now at the Hoover Institute has been suggesting a version of this since 2011.<sup>60</sup> There are also similarities to this proposal in the existing AF enlisted assignment system. Key to this proposal would be AFPC oversight, management, and final approval authority. This is important as the needs of the AF, developmental requirements, unit manning levels, and identity diversity need to be centrally managed. In a market-based system where jobs are listed on a job-board, supply and demand would balance the equation. If a particular vacancy at a particular location received no interest, officers would be non-volunteered to fill the vacancy much in the same way they are today. This recommendation would also allow members to stay at their unit longer if they choose to do so. In this case, they would simply apply for a posted vacancy at the base they were already assigned to and compete to be rehired. Again, AFPC would have final approval authority. This jobs board would exclude command assignments and only apply to O-5s and below. It could be limited to only assignments at the wing-level and below or expanded to staff assignments at major commands and the Air Staff. The intent of this program would be to give the gaining commander more hiring input into the officers they will be commanding, and the officers more input into their career.

The primary benefit of this proposal is the opportunity to better match the right officers, in the right jobs, where they would also prefer to go. It is generally true that

most officers do not prefer assignments in isolated or extreme cold weather locations. Under today's system commanders often non-volunteer below average performs to fill these types of assignments. In a market-based system where the pool of eligibles is in the hundreds instead only a few, there will be a higher likelihood for an officer to volunteer for one of the low demand assignments. Another benefit is giving commanders the ability to build a unit based on their unique requirements that often times only commanders know. In the civilian business world, most of the time new employees are not thrust on the gaining boss, but instead are hired based on their background and the needs of company.

This proposal does not suggest cutting the losing commander out of the equation. In fact, they would have both informal input via background conversations, as well as formal input by documenting the officer's strengths and weakness on a private section on the jobs board. The system would only show officers vacancies they were qualified for and eligible to fill, and only show commanders the officers that are eligible to fill those vacancies. The AFPC's role in this proposal is instrumental. While the gaining commander would publish the job vacancy details, AFPC would retain the authority to release the listing and ultimately approve the hiring selection. This would keep central management oversight in the vital areas of unit manning, officer development, identity diversity, and the AF's needs. Tim Kane articulates that in order to "stanch the talent bleed, the military needs to embrace an entrepreneurial structure, not just culture."<sup>61</sup> This revolution in officer assignments again addresses the environmental challenges of shifting family demographics, and millennial's desire for a bigger say in their career paths and their future. The proposal is tailored to officer's preferences and

ensures diversity in collaboration between the gaining commander and AFPC. Most importantly, it reduces the instances where officers and their families are non-volunteered into assignments they do not want, ultimately improving retention. Like the first recommendation, there are concerns that will need to be addressed.

The first is the chance for nepotism to creep into the hiring process that does not exist today where gaining commanders hire their friends or those they are most familiar with. This concern is valid, and if not addressed would be a significant setback to progress in diversity. To prevent this, in addition to AFPC, commanders higher than the squadron level would be required to provide oversight of the process. There should also be certain flags in the system where gaining commanders self-identify if they already know the applicant. Another concern would be for the highest demand jobs to receive the most interest, and therefore be disproportionately filled by the best officers. This likelihood does exist, but is no different than in today's system, where commanders reward their best performers with the assignments in highest demand. Lastly, there would be additional costs to develop this new jobs market software. While a legitimate concern, the Department of Defense and government already have similar technology and online programs that could be modified to include this proposal. The second recommendation focuses on updating the developmental education system.

#### Officer Professional Development – Intermediate School at Civilian Universities

This recommendation suggests redirecting the 275 intermediate PME assignments currently allocated to ACSC, and instead sending the same 275 officers to civilian graduate programs. The cost of this program would be offset by a possible reduction in ACSC's faculty and potentially fewer permanent change of stations (PCSs). Officers would still need to complete ACSC via correspondence in order to comply with

Joint PME requirements. Officers would select from a pre-approved list of graduate programs and academic specialties. The AF would centrally manage the allocation, distribution, and final approval for these assignments. Officers would have two types of degree programs from which to choose. The first is what already exists today, a one-year government funded graduate program with a three-year service commitment or payback upon graduation. The second choice is to attend a two-year graduate degree program. This option would include a four-year service commitment at graduation and should give consideration to requiring the officer to obtain a scholarship or use a portion of their post 9-11 benefit to fund the additional year. The second option would be completely voluntary. The AF should offer officers a choice of pre-defined degrees that are targeted to a wide variety of AF needs. Typical AF disciplines of science and engineering would undoubtedly make the list, but less common degrees like Public Policy, English, and Juris Doctorate programs should also be offered. There is also opportunity to pair these officer's new skills with follow-on assignments that are an appropriate match for these skills.

This proposal is only for those officers who typically would attend ACSC and does not recommend replacing joint attendance at sister service schools. These programs are important for joint effectiveness and already offer a more diverse experience. The proposal also does not recommend any changes to senior service schools or war colleges, and would not recommend any changes to the AF's premier School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) program.

The strongest case for this recommendation is that it marries improved officer development with the officer's preferences. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, the founder

of *soft power*, contends that while officers are completely trained for operations, they might lack the “contextual intelligence” required for “effective leadership in complex environments.”<sup>62</sup> He goes on to argue that this gap is caused from not enough military personnel being exposed to different perspectives.<sup>63</sup> This sentiment espouses that “we have the most to learn from those who are least like us.”<sup>64</sup> It is one thing to defend your thoughts against those who look and think like you, but another to defend your thoughts with those from which you have little in common. Here is an example that highlights the tendency for military members to be like-minded. A 2013 Military Times’ poll showed that only ten percent of military service members identify as Democrats.<sup>65</sup> Contrast this with college and university professors who according to the Higher Education Research Institute, self-identified as liberals compared to conservatives by a five-to-one margin.<sup>66</sup> This would improve the previously identified AF weakness in developing cognitive diversity and would also help narrow the civil-military gap.

Sending more military members to civilian universities not only gets them out of their echo-chambers, but also holds promise for an exceptional and potentially improved overall education. For example, at ACSC fewer than 25% of the faculty have a terminal degree or Phd., and 50% of the faculty never graduated from in-residence PME.<sup>67</sup> This is not an entirely new concept. The AF already sends 75 mid-career officers each year to fellowships and civilian graduate programs instead of attending military colleges. These development programs are in the highest demand and are accompanied with the added benefit of being labeled as Air Force Fellows. This new proposal simply expands the number of in-resident intermediate developmental opportunities at civilian graduate programs.

Another benefit to this proposal will be its popularity with officers and their families. By selecting the degree and school, officers will be more passionate and motivated to learn. Families will have new options as to where they might want to live. In some cases, an officer will not even require a PCS if the university is in a location where they are currently assigned, both saving the government money and fostering better relations with the local community. This one program alone addresses the environmental challenges of changing military family dynamics, millennials preference for diverse work experiences and higher education, and will directly narrow the civil-military gap by exposing civilian graduate students and their communities to more AF officers. It will target talent, as those affected by the recommendation were already selected by an AF board putting them in the top third of their peer group. Additionally, adopting this recommendation shows that the AF is willing to listen and respond to officer's preferences. Ultimately, this plan will improve talent retention with the intent to develop and produce better outcomes. Of course, there will be some concerns with this recommendation.

First, there is no appetite in today's fiscal environment for new and more costly programs. This initiative would have to be funded by proportional offsets in manning saved from ACSC reductions and savings from fewer PCS's. Another common concern is that there is not enough capacity at top tier graduate programs for hundreds of military officers to saturate their programs. This proposal is only for an additional 275 students across more than a dozen potential degrees. It will still be managed by the AF, and while not all students will be admitted into prestigious programs, all will be admitted to programs that the AF approves. A third concern is the potential loss of air power



acumen in mid-career officers. This concern is mitigated by maintaining the SAASS program, requiring ACSC completion via distant learning, and rebutted by the fact that 60% of officers at intermediate PME are already at programs other than ACSC. Others are concerned that this recommendation values different experiences over a standardized military degree curriculum. In this case the online completion of ACSC, improved thought diversity, centralized AF control, and the success of the existing AF Fellows program will mitigate the military standardization loss with no net loss.

### Conclusion

More than any other personnel challenge, the AF will struggle to retain officer talent based on today's environment. A combination of evolving family dynamics, changing officer's preferences, and high demand for officer's skills, all point to the need to address a revolution in personnel management. If addressed correctly, retention will improve at the same time the AF becomes more cognitively diverse and America's growing civil-military gap is narrowed. This paper makes two specific proposals targeted at doing just that. By developing a new internal market-based assignment system and expanding opportunities for mid-career officers to attend civilian graduate programs, the AF, powered by Airmen, will be better able to fly, fight and win in air, space, and cyberspace.

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