Reserve Recruiting in the College Market

New Educational Benefits Could Attract High-Aptitude Recruits

To fulfill their national defense missions, both the active-duty and Reserve components of the U.S. military services must attract and retain high-quality personnel. However, high-quality personnel—those who have a high school diploma and score in the top half of the score distribution on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT)—are increasingly interested in obtaining a college degree. To attract these individuals, the Active and Reserve forces offer a range of educational benefits to their soldiers. The Army and Navy, for example, have been experimenting with new programs for active-duty recruits that enhance educational benefits (increasing the maximum monthly and annual payouts, for example) and/or allow recruits to attend college first, before they report for active duty.1 While many Reserve educational benefits have been expanded, there have been no major initiatives to restructure these programs or to develop new programs that help reservists combine Reserve duty with college attendance. As military planners prepare to meet diverse and uncertain threats, and as Reserve units continue to participate in a wide range of military and civilian operations, the demand for high-quality personnel in the Reserves will remain high. Would programs similar to those implemented in the Active forces work for the Reserves?

RAND Assessed Need for a New Educational Benefit in the Reserves

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (Manpower and Personnel) asked the RAND Corporation to assess whether new educational programs would help the Reserve forces meet their recruiting goals, and whether the potential of these programs warrants a more extensive evaluation, including randomized field trials. The study considered both prior-service and non-prior-service recruits—i.e., those who had served on active duty before beginning their Reserve service and those who had not.

RAND did not explicitly test how a new educational benefit program would affect Reserve recruiting; rather, the approach was qualitative and descriptive. We examined how college attendance has changed over time among both youth in general and reservists in particular, and how college attendance and completion rates vary according to cognitive ability. We examined how reservists currently combine Reserve service with college attendance and civilian employment. We compared reservists’ educational benefits with those available to civilians and active-duty veterans. Finally, we synthesized our findings and assessed whether a restructured educational benefit is likely to affect enlistments, and if so, what kind of potential recruits these new benefits might attract.

Reservists Pursue Both College and Work, and Use Available Benefits

The demand for college among reservists is strong and increasing; 23 percent of reservists obtain

Abstract

RAND found that, for most military service members, college attendance is compatible with Reserve service. Many reservists successfully combine service with both civilian jobs and college, and use the educational benefits available to them. However, those who score the highest on the AFQT may want to pursue college more intensively than the Reserve components allow, particularly given the increased possibility of activation or of longer activations. To attract these individuals, the military might consider programs that allow recruits to attend college without the risk of being activated with their Reserve units.

1 Examples include the Army’s “College First” program and the Navy’s “Tech Prep” program.
a college degree by age 30. As the figure shows, the educational attainment of reservists has increased along with their expectations. In 2000, 20 percent of reservists age 19 to 24 were enrolled in a two-year degree program, and 34 percent were currently enrolled in a four-year degree program. This rate of college enrollment (54 percent overall) is substantially higher than the rate of college enrollment reported in the Current Population Survey for males age 19 to 24 with at least a high school degree in 2000 (39 percent overall). We observe the same general pattern in educational attainment and expectations among reservists age 25 to 30.

Educational Expectations, Attainment, and Enrollment Among Reservists Age 19 to 24, 1986, 1992, and 2000

In the overall population, the demand for college has increased throughout the AFQT distribution and, for men, has increased especially among individuals who score in the middle AFQT categories. However, these individuals pursue college less intensively and work more hours on their civilian jobs than those who score in the upper ranges of the AFQT. Less than one-third of AFQT Category III individuals finish a two- or four-year degree program within six years of their initial enrollment.

Reserve service is generally compatible with college attendance. In times of peace, most reservists are obligated to drill only one weekend per month and two weeks during the summer. However, the risk of being called to active duty has increased greatly since 9/11. Individuals who want to attend college without interruption may find this increased risk to be unacceptable.

Although the Reserves will help finance a significant portion of college costs, reservists are particularly likely to work while attending college. Among reservists age 19 to 24, 64 percent of those attending college reported working in a civilian job compared with 52 percent of all civilian males in this age range attending college.

According to the results of the 2000 Survey of Reserve Component Personnel, 70 percent of reservists age 19 to 30 who are enrolled in college reported using military educational benefits. Of those individuals, about 65 percent reported that their educational benefits were an important influence on their deciding to stay in the Reserves. Furthermore, we found that the financial aid received by reservists age 19 to 30 seems to be comparable to aid received by active-duty members.

Designing New Educational Benefits for Reservists

The key populations the Reserve components seek to recruit, those in AFQT Categories II–IIIB, have a higher propensity to attend college than in the past. Less well known, however, is that this population typically attends college less intensively and completes college less rapidly than individuals in AFQT Category I. Consequently, educational benefits in the Reserves generally need not be tailored to individuals who pursue college intensively.

On the other hand, higher-aptitude individuals (those who score in Categories I and II on the AFQT) who have a strong preference for attending college intensively may resist Reserve service because they would find the potential disruption of college for Active service unacceptable. If the Reserves want to attract these individuals for specific occupations or technical areas, or to improve the overall aptitude of the enlisted force, they might allow some reservists to pursue college first and serve in the Reserves afterward.

One possibility for attracting higher-aptitude individuals is an ROTC-like program for enlisted personnel that would allow individuals to attend college while serving in a Reserve unit, without the risk of activation. After college, these reservists might be required to enlist for a longer term of service or perhaps serve with a higher risk of activation. The inability of the Reserve components to activate the participants would significantly reduce the participants’ value to the Reserves in the short term, and potentially have an adverse effect on the morale of reservists who are in college but are not program participants and thus are vulnerable to activation. Whether such a program would be cost effective is a topic requiring further research. Moreover, implementation of these programs should include an ongoing evaluation component.

More formal analyses of these types of programs may be warranted in the future as the Reserve components adjust to the demands of homeland security and the war on terrorism, international peacekeeping efforts, and the Department of Defense’s desire to more fully integrate the Reserve and Active forces.