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# Advancing the U.S. Air Force's Force-Development Initiative

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## Summary

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A mismatch in the late 1990s between the qualifications needed for key general officer positions and the available candidates' backgrounds stimulated an extensive U.S. Air Force effort to improve the development of senior leaders. The Air Force needed to develop cohorts (individuals who enter the force in a year's time) of senior officers—generals and colonels—who have sufficient breadth for their current jobs and for positions they may need to fill in the future. In the past, most officers were managed within their career fields and were too narrowly specialized. The intent of our research was to understand the types of skills (or “competencies”) that each officer position really needs and then to set targets for the numbers of those who should acquire those skills over their careers before they are promoted to colonel. The effort evolved into the current force-development initiative, which is managed by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel; advised by the FMDC, chaired by the Vice Chief of Staff; and substantially carried out by career-field managers, functional development teams, and the Air Force Personnel Center's officer assignment teams. The initiative concentrates first on the development of officers in grades below colonel. While parallel systems are forming for enlisted and civilian personnel and the reserve components, our monograph addresses the system for officers in the active component.

The force-development system should aim to develop enough officers with specified backgrounds so that multiple qualified candidates will be available for each opening. Beyond the occupational specialties (primary skills) where they substantially “grew up,” most general

officers ideally would have significant experience in a secondary or paired occupation or skill, preferably with corresponding education or training. For example, a bomber pilot with a paired skill in international political-military affairs would be regarded as properly qualified for nearly twice as many general officer positions as one lacking a paired skill. It usually takes deliberate development for an officer to gain experience outside his or her primary specialty. Subsequent analysis extended the analysis of primary and secondary skills for general officers and formulated targets for paired skills when officers are promoted to colonel—targets that the development teams began using during 2005 to guide the mixes of developmental vectors selected for officers at lower grades in their career fields. For example, at least 5 to 6 percent (but preferably about 12 percent) of new mobility colonels (“rated” officers who grew up as airlift or tanker pilots or navigators) would have secondary skills in planning and programming, and about the same share would have secondary skills in acquisition or financial management (see p. 18). Factors like job sequencing (e.g., some jobs are appropriate first jobs for colonels while others require senior colonels), ill-shaped job pyramids (e.g., some skill pairs are needed for senior jobs only), and the need for selectivity (multiple qualified candidates should be available when openings occur) imply that substantially more officers than positions need paired skills. Flow analysis found that, overall, at least 31 percent, and preferably about 58 percent, of new line colonels should have secondary skills, even though in fiscal year 2002 only 23 percent of about 2,800 line colonel positions needed secondary skills. Naturally, the targeted secondary skills and percentages differ across career fields (see p. 16).

A four-step approach can create notably more-specific developmental targets for officers in grades below general officer within a particular career field: (1) identify and prioritize the types of experience, education, and training that should precede each category of job (identify the demand, at least for the jobs in the field grades—major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel), now and in the future; (2) ascertain the backgrounds that officers have accumulated (assess the supply); (3) compare supply with demand (gap analysis); and (4) plan ways to close the gaps. (See pp. 20–26.) We have demonstrated the approach for

space and missile operations officers (the 13S career field) and are using it now with (and for) the “rated” (11X [pilot], 12X [navigator], and 13B [air battle manager]) and intelligence (14N) career fields. When coupled with careful management of officers’ assignments and schooling, the approach promises far more complete fulfillment of positions’ needs and far greater use of officers’ backgrounds than are currently available (see Figure 4, p. 25).

## **Key Findings**

### **Multiple Skills Required**

Analysis of both general officer and colonel-level (O-6) positions shows that many positions need pairs of skills—primary and secondary (see pp. 2–3, 6–7, 11). That is largely why the Air Force instituted the FMDC and all the associated procedures, to ensure that enough officers get experience in multiple specialties and to counter the tendency toward overspecialization.

### **Assessing Skill Requirements**

Systematically identifying (and periodically updating) positions’ requirements for both primary and secondary skills is essential. While it may seem daunting at the outset, it has proven feasible to identify such requirements and to get them accepted across the Air Force, as RAND’s work addressing the military and civilian executive forces demonstrates, for example. We recommend using expert panels rather than surveys of job incumbents to identify and update most skill requirements, especially for the field grades (see pp. 12, 22).

### **Important Implications of Multiple-Skill Requirements**

Multiple-skill requirements have extensive ramifications, as found through flow analysis. Even if a minority of positions demands multiple skills, to meet those demands a majority of the officer cohort may need to have multiple skills. The inventory must include many multi-skilled officers, in spite of officers’ natural desire to stay within their primary specialty in each assignment (see Table 4, p. 16).

### **Keeping Officers on the Right Path**

The Air Force needs continuing management to ensure that officers, at least in the aggregate, are following the right pathways. In particular,

- The Air Force needs agreed-upon mechanisms for tracking skills, especially to answer the question: How much is enough? This remains an open question, since originally it was believed that two tours were needed in a secondary skill, but since then it has become policy to grant a “developmental [skill] identifier” after just one year of experience (see p. 9). Having just one year’s experience in an occupational area, perhaps even early in their careers, probably falls far short of making officers viable candidates for leadership positions in those areas once they become colonels or generals.
- The development system needs to manage career fields so that enough officers have the targeted skill pairs by the time of a cohort’s promotion to O-6. However, a paired skill should not be essential for promotion to colonel (see p. 19).

### **Next Steps**

We recommend that the Air Force make its formal instruction about officer force development (AFI 36-2640) more specific regarding the need for paired skills at senior levels and regarding the need to systematically plan and manage development for far larger numbers of midcareer positions. We believe the FMDC and its members should play important roles in shaping, advocating, coordinating, and monitoring how the functional communities (e.g., operations, intelligence, logistics, personnel, or acquisition) execute their force-development responsibilities.

The force-development community should take the following steps:

- Establish standards for earning paired skills, more demanding than earning developmental identifiers (see p. 9).



- Update and extend the database of backgrounds needed for colonel positions (see p. 12).
- Clarify that earning a paired skill is not essential for promotion to colonel (see p. 19).
- Set development teams on course to create measurable developmental targets for grades below general officer (see pp. 19–27).
- Create and monitor measures tracking the development of officers promoted to each grade, serving in command jobs, attending developmental courses in residence, or holding other key assignments (see pp. 27–28).
- Find ways to use or enhance data systems to (1) consistently register jobs' needs for prior experience, education, and training; (2) track individual officers' accumulating portfolios of experience, education, and training; and (3) help recommend and make assignments whose demands officers meet, that use the officers' backgrounds, that help manage career fields properly, and that match members' preferences insofar as possible (see p. 28–29).
- Improve force planning and management so that career fields' numerical strengths align more consistently with requirements and leave room for deliberate professional development (see p. 29).

Beyond yielding information that the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel (AF/A1) and the FMDC can use in deciding resource allocations and making system adjustments, these steps should help the wide range of force-development players to develop consistent, efficient, and effective plans and means for improving the development of officers in their career fields. The steps are also likely to provide insights and mechanisms that will be valuable more widely as the Air Force extends and enhances force development to address the enlisted and civilian forces and the reserve components.