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# The Weighted Airman Promotion System

Standardizing Test Scores

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## Summary

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The U.S. Air Force has three major independent systems that affect the health of its enlisted force: the manpower system, the strength management system, and the enlisted promotion system. Because the current organizational structure lacks broad coordinating and control mechanisms, this independence spawns policies and procedures that occasionally work at cross-purposes. We discuss these systems at length in *Air Force Enlisted Force Management: System Interactions and Synchronization Strategies* (Schiefer et al., 2007). That monograph proposes multiple follow-on efforts, and this study fulfills one of those recommendations.

Specifically, we examine the practice of not standardizing the test scores that are part of the enlisted promotion system.<sup>1</sup> This practice produces results that are inconsistent with two overarching policies. First, Air Force Policy Directive 36-25 requires that the enlisted promotion system “identify those people with the highest potential to fill positions of increased grade and responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> We show that not standardizing test scores means that the Air Force emphasizes longevity and testing ability differently across and within specialties to identify individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Many, if not most, tests that are administered to different groups at different times are standardized. Standardization involves mathematically transforming raw test scores into new scores with desirable properties. For example, the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) reports standardized scores, so that an AFQT score of 72 represents the same level of ability today as it did four years ago. Were it not for standardized scores, the military services could not track the quality of new recruits over time.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Air Force, 1993, p. 1.

with the highest potential. Further, we demonstrate that these standards vary randomly over time. Random variations in the impacts of selection criteria make it difficult to understand how the Air Force can be achieving its primary promotion policy objective.

Our second concern deals with differences in promotion opportunity. While the testing dimension of the enlisted promotion system allows members to influence their own destinies, not standardizing scores means that members of specialties in which testing carries more weight have more control than members of other specialties do. This produces random promotion opportunity differences across Air Force specialty codes (AFSCs), thus violating an equity principle that can be traced to a 1970s-era strategic plan for enlisted force management known as the Total Objective Plan for Career Airman Personnel (TOPCAP).<sup>3</sup> Because the Air Force does not standardize test scores, the current policy of equal *selection* opportunity does not imply equal *promotion* opportunity over a career. Consequently, there is a greater opportunity to achieve senior enlisted grades in some AFSCs than in others.

The random aspects of the enlisted promotion system also produce other potentially undesirable consequences. For example, not standardizing scores yields unpredictable manning percentages by specialty. This has negative force management implications. Uncertainty also means that the Air Force, when it fills future strategic chief master sergeant positions, will disproportionately draw from specialties in which testing carries more weight.<sup>4</sup>

The modification we propose would not change equal selection opportunity. However, it would affect selection decisions within AFSCs. Test score standardization would primarily affect those com-

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<sup>3</sup> The Air Force Personnel Plan (U.S. Air Force, 1975) provides TOPCAP details. A primary objective of TOPCAP was to maintain a career force, and it established a promotion system founded on equity across specialties. That culture of equity persists throughout the enlisted force today, and subsequent personnel plans have consistently stressed the importance of equity. One premise of TOPCAP was that promotion equity and predictability were keys to realizing retention rates that would sustain the career enlisted force.

<sup>4</sup> The Air Force fills strategic chief positions through commander involvement or nomination processes.

peting for selection to E5–E7. It would have extremely limited impacts on E8 and E9 selections, which are determined primarily by selection board scores.

After presenting supporting data, we discuss a range of outcomes that the Air Force could achieve by adopting various standardization strategies. We recommend that the Air Force leadership implement a standardization strategy that will produce predictable outcomes that are consistent with its personnel priorities and policies.