The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is committed to improving diversity and inclusion for members throughout its ranks so that the organization reflects the diversity of the general population. A primary tool in this project is the concept and practice of *blinding*. Blinding concepts seek to downplay or ignore gender, racial, and ethnic differences and to unify people under common goals and values. Blinding practices, such as removing photographs from personnel files in selection boards, seek to minimize opportunities for bias and to level the playing field for all candidates for any position based on merit (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

But research and experience suggest that blinding alone may not be the best strategy to achieve the DAF’s diversity and inclusion goals and can even be counterproductive in some contexts. In this Perspective, we discuss the scholarly literature on the efficacy of blinding strategies, how these insights apply in the context of DAF goals, other approaches that should be explored, and steps the DAF should take to better advance its goal of a more equitable and inclusive workforce. We focus on the efficacy of blinding in three areas: unifying members around core values, increasing
People might still carry their previously existing biases, even when they subscribe to the U.S. Air Force’s core value of “service before self.”

representation and inclusion in the ranks and in leadership, and reducing bias and discrimination.

Efficacy of Blinding Strategies to Unify Members Around Core Values

A key goal of the DAF, other military services, civil institutions (such as law enforcement), and even sports teams is to achieve unity among members. This is based on a blinding concept that seeks to minimize individual differences and to inculcate identity with the group. Military service calls for an especially high level of personal sacrifice and group identification. The military asks people to acculturate for many good reasons, including (1) to abandon biases in favor of the team concept; (2) to place the individual below the goals and missions of the team; and (3) to promote a sense of selflessness. The Air Force core values call for “service before self” and a colloquial bluing of those who enter (U.S. Air Force, 2015a, p. 5; U.S. Air Force, 2015b). The idea of a color-blind or gender-blind population is part of this goal: Racial, ethnic, and gender differences would seem to be irrelevant if everyone is blue. Although bluing may not be an official concept in name, the concept is encompassed in followership, which is partially characterized in the U.S. Air Force’s Core Doctrine as “a follower should exhibit loyalty that incorporates a high organizational commitment” (U.S. Air Force, 2015c, p. 11). Although bluing manifests formally as followership in the “Little Blue Book” and the symbolic ceremony of “crossing the blue line,” it also manifests informally as a reference to good DAF practice, such as re-bluing to re-assimilate airmen into USAF operations (U.S. Air Force, 2015a; Maxwell Air Force Base, 2019; Felch, 2013).

It would be difficult for minorities to fully internalize this notion of followership, or informal bluing, without ceding aspects of their identity to assimilate with the majority of their peers. As Lt Col Myron Chivis shared in a candid AFSOC Unfiltered podcast, “In the Air Force, I have assimilated in ways to conform to the things that the majority in USAF do . . . but I had to do those things if I wanted to [fit in] with the majority of Airmen” (AFSOC, 2020). Chivis is referring to the unspoken bluing process, in which color-blindness is required not on the part of the majority but on the part of the minority to assimilate.

Common values and group identification are critical and important aspects of military service. But research and experience suggest that these aspects do not necessarily override the problems of bias and discrimination. People might still carry their previously existing biases, even when they subscribe to the U.S. Air Force’s “service before self” core value. This is an observed dynamic in the military, as evidenced by the need for current and continued focus on improving inclusion, diversity, equity, and access.
Experience shows that a workplace that has open and unaddressed issues, such as racism, will not be changed with blinding strategies that seek to assimilate members under a common identity. A 2020 *Washington Post* article describes the horrific experiences reported by graduates from the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) (Horton, 2020). The article cites interviews with five black graduates whose time at the USMA spanned decades. The graduates said their experiences “ranged from pride in entering an elite university to sadness [resulting from the] feeling they could not be their full self in a mostly white school” (Horton, 2020). Although the USMA seeks to unify its members in the “Long Gray Line,” the notion that cadets must “lose [themselves] in general” to be blended into the whole can exacerbate existing biases and institutionalize racism within the USMA:

The alumni recounted moments of suppressing black cultural and social references among white classmates, fielding questions about black hair and hearing whispers that athletics—not their academic rigor—led to their offer to attend. . . . Several cadets in the Class of 2020 said they were called the n-word, according to a letter signed by nine recent graduates, some of whom are black, and all held leadership positions. “I was told that I was going to rob someone because I was Black,” one unnamed cadet said. Others reported similar language and veiled threats, such as nooses hidden in desks as bleak practical jokes, followed by inaction by faculty. (Horton, 2020)

A further challenge for military organizations is avoiding the loss of the unique and varied perspectives of individuals as they are united in the organization. The idea of a color-blind and gender-blind community parallels the timeless metaphor of the United States as a “melting pot” in which individual differences are subsumed within a larger, group identity. “The ‘melting pot’ metaphor is used to describe how immigrants who come to America eventually become assimilated into American culture, thus creating multiple cultures that have blended into one” (Civic Issues, 2019). Recent literature on diversity has called into question (1) whether a society (or organization) can truly achieve blindness in this sense and (2) whether such blindness should be the goal. Many now prefer the metaphor of the “salad bowl,” which suggests “that immigrants who come to America combine their cultures with others, but still retain their own cultural identity. Basically, America is one big integration of unique, distinct cultures” (Civic Issues, 2019). A similar shift in perspective might be desirable in a military setting, where members are seen as contributing their unique perspectives to the shared values and objectives...
An indicator that marginalized groups are being fully included, and not merely represented, in the life of an organization would be greater diversity at senior levels.

of the whole. In such a case, it might be necessary to replace the idea of a color-blind and gender-blind population with an idea that promotes greater awareness and acceptance of differences, which we discuss further next.

Efficacy of Blinding Strategies to Increase Representation and Inclusion in the Ranks and in Leadership

The DAF has a goal of improving gender, racial, and ethnic diversity at all levels, so that the organization reflects the diversity of the general population (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2020; Kamarck, 2019). Research shows that more-diverse military and law enforcement organizations have greater trust within both those who serve in those organizations and the people those organizations serve and draw from for members and are more effective at accomplishing their missions. The converse is also true; research has shown that armies with high rates of inequality have done poorly based on various measures of battlefield performance (Lyall, 2020a; Lyall 2020b).

The U.S. military, including the DAF, has become better at representing the diversity of the general U.S. population within the services as a whole. In research conducted for the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, RAND researchers found that overall representation in the services has increased over time (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011); ongoing RAND research suggests that that trend has continued since 2011. For example, according to a fiscal year 2018 summary report from the CNA, female representation has reached its highest level in the history of the U.S. armed services, and ethnic and racial diversity now approximates civilian benchmarks (CNA, 2019).

Although positive, representation alone indicates that historically underrepresented groups exist within the organization at some level. This measure, however, has no bearing on how historically underrepresented or marginalized groups are surviving, let alone thriving, within the system. Moreover, increases in racial and ethnic representation across the services does not necessarily lead to decreases in bias or discrimination. Today’s thinking about diversity emphasizes the importance of inclusion and representation.1

An indicator that marginalized groups are being fully included, and not merely represented, in the life of an organization would be greater diversity at senior levels. Recent gains in aggregate representation within military services have not translated into more-diverse senior leadership. Table 1 shows that, although the total active-duty force is relatively diverse, representation within military services generally decreases as one moves up the ranks.
Part of the reason for a lack of diversity at senior levels is a meritocratic promotion system that seeks to be blind to racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Removing photographs from consideration by promotion boards and selection processes is thought to eliminate bias (although it still might be possible for promotion boards to deduce information about a candidate from other information in the file). However, even after an underrepresented person is selected for a lower-level leadership position, he or she could still face discriminatory practices that preclude that person from ascending still higher. Blinding in selection ignores the biases and barriers that can prevent people from standing out in the ways that count. Research shows that historically disadvantaged communities do not necessarily excel in ways that are rewarded by a purely meritocratic system. There appears to be an inherent tension between increasing diversity and inclusion across military ranks and the intended meritocratic nature of military service, which favors communities with higher historical and current access to resources, such as education (Caldwell, 2019). “Decades’ worth of studies show that a diverse workforce measurably improves decision making, problem solving, creativity, innovation, and flexibility”; however, “most of us also believe that hiring, development, and compensation decisions should come down to merit” (Burrell, 2016). Although diversity and inclusion in the workforce and the merit-based organizational approach to selection and promotion process do not appear contradictory at first glance, these factors are difficult “to reconcile in practice” because of “cognitive roadblocks . . . getting in the way” (Burrell, 2016).2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank and Grade</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic(^a)</th>
<th>Multi/Unknown/Other</th>
<th>Gender (female)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O-7 and above</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer (O-1 to O-6)</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant Officer</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>Data not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Enlisted (E-7 and above)</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted (all)</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Active-Duty Force</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCES: Data derived from Tables 6 and 9 in Kamarck, 2019. Original data compiled from the officer and enlisted figures from U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2018. Total officer calculations exclude warrant officers for purposes of comparison because they are ineligible for general/flag rank and the U.S. Air Force does not have warrant officers. Warrant officers are included in total active-duty force calculation. The total active-duty force calculation does not include cadets and midshipmen. The O-7 and above calculation includes general/flag officers.

NOTE: Indigenous groups and Pacific Islander data have been added to the “Multi/Unknown/Other” category, and female representation across ranks has also been added.

\(^a\) Note that Hispanic is not a racial group, but rather an ethnicity.
Furthermore, “there is a lack of diversity at the top, because there are, in fact, fewer minorities with the qualifications and experience required for those positions, and the minorities who are qualified are overlooked or leave the industry by mid-career” (Windscheid et al., 2017). Privilege fuels the drive to success, which manifests more opportunities as one moves further and is able to ascend. “The greatest barriers to inclusivity lie right at the starting line in the first five years of a career” (Peña, Hinsen, and Wilbur, 2018). Vestiges of this reality also exist within the military, with the career development track for an officer spanning through key and essential assignments beyond the first five years that set conditions for future opportunities. Blinding practices to increase representation gloss over multiple factors that have cumulative impacts on diversity and inclusion for general officers. Such practices have the potential to reinforce the narratives offered as to why there is a lack of minority general officers, such as (1) racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to meet the requirements; (2) minorities wittingly choose the less competitive paths; and (3) the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) is less competitive in the eye of the boards. The Military Leadership Diversity Commission found in its 2011 report that there are multiple factors that could have cumulative effects on the diversity of general/flag officers (see Figure 1), and that addressing these underlying issues would require sustained commitment to countering the narratives mentioned earlier (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011).

Moreover, “winner-take-all markets intensify the consequences of our cognitive shortcuts” (Burrell, 2016; Brownlee, 2019). A winner-takes-all market is one in which small differences in performance lead to large differences in reward, as with the systems used to determine military officer promotions and selections for key and essential billets. The pyramid nature of the military ranks structure makes the winner-take-all dynamic prevalent in officer promotions, where minority representation is lowest. The competitive nature of climbing into a limited number of coveted senior-level positions potentially exacerbates conditions associated with inequalities. Group discussions meant to ensure rigor and counteract bias in hiring and promotion processes may have the unintended consequence of dampening diversity and inclusion by “giving negative racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes greater sway over decisions” (Burrell, 2016).

If the DAF’s goal is to increase racial, ethnic, and gender representation at the most-senior levels, then it should look beyond blinding strategies to activities that reduce more of the systemic barriers to advancement—and not just in key developmental and career-enhancing roles but for every type of job or role within an organization. Focusing on inclusive work environments would allow more people through and
Multiple factors could have cumulative effects on the diversity of general/flag officers

- **Race and ethnicity**
  - Exposure: Lack role models; less likely to be exposed to operational career fields, combat, or pilots
- **Gender**
  - Career preference: Less likely to compete for operations
  - Training opportunity: ROTC vs. military academies
- **Training and Development**
  - Training requirement: Less likely to meet requirements
  - Graduation rates: Less likely to graduate from specialized training
- **Retention**
  - Life decision: Compatibility with spouse’s career or job

Hence, only a sustained effort to address underlying issues could change the diversity of general/flag officers
Bottom-up interventions in the diversity and inclusion space . . . have been more successful than top-down approaches such as affirmative action, given that the latter is no longer supported by Department of Defense policy. Efficacy of Blinding Strategies to Reduce Bias and Discrimination

Having discussed the efficacy of blinding strategies to unify people around a set of common standards and to increase representation in both the ranks and leadership, we now focus on whether blinding practices help reduce bias and discrimination in the workplace. These practices might include the removal of photographs from personnel files being reviewed for an evaluation board.

The evidence is mixed regarding the efficacy of blinding strategies for this purpose. This result perhaps reflects differences in the types of workplaces and/or underrepresented communities. For example, research indicates that blinding practices may be more effective at combating gender bias than racial and ethnic bias. In a 2018 study on the benefits of gender-blindness for STEM stereotyping, researchers concluded that “gender-blindness (compared to awareness) minimizes the gender gap on explicit stereotyping measures, as well as diminishes STEM stereotyping in target evaluations” (Martin and Phillips, 2019). In this context, awareness refers to policies and programs that seek to acknowledge and instill acceptance of differences within a group (Martin and Phillips, 2019). Gender-blindness is more effective at increasing female workplace confidence (e.g., assertiveness and independence) and reducing gender disparities (e.g., risk-taking and salary negotiation) than gender awareness (Martin and Phillips, 2019). Researchers have also found that gender-blindness either decreased or had no effect on men’s confidence, demonstrating a unique positive effect of gender-blindness on women’s confidence (Martin and Phillips, 2019). Although gender-blindness can, in certain situations and contexts, effectively reduce gender stereotypes
Although gender-blindness can, in certain situations and contexts, effectively reduce gender stereotypes by minimizing the social and biological differences between women and men, the same is not true for gender awareness strategies, which can backfire by highlighting harmful gender stereotypes. In their 2018 study, Martin and Phillips concluded that, “using no strategy may be more effective than gender awareness” (Martin and Phillips, 2019, p. 304).

By contrast, race-blindness—more commonly referred to as color-blindness—can temporarily reduce bias and prejudice in response to particular incidents involving race, but the long-term effects of color-blindness limit opportunities for white people to engage with and appreciate important cultural identities and experiences of other groups. Race awareness strategies, by contrast, seem “to heighten salience of racial minorities’ (often positive) cultural or experiential differences” (Martin and Phillips, 2019, p. 295). Research shows that “diversity aware ideology (i.e., multiculturalism) is more beneficial than a diversity blind ideology (i.e., color-blindness) for racial-ethnic minorities,” producing “better performance outcomes; more psychological engagement, inclusion, and workplace satisfaction; more positive leadership self-perceptions; and reduced perceptions of bias and turnover intentions” (Gündemir, Martin, and Homan, 2019, p. 1).

Even the mixed results discussed thus far should be viewed with caution. Studies have shown that “multiculturalism and gender-blindness can both produce negative side effects for racial minorities and women, respectively, which highlights the importance of developing approaches to address the shortcomings of these conventional ideologies” (Gündemir, Martin, and Homan, 2019, p. 1). Thus, the DAF should be cautious about relying on blinding policies alone to address bias and discrimination in the workplace.

Alternatives to Blinding

Thus far, we have discussed research suggesting that blinding concepts and practices alone may not be the most effective ways to achieve DAF’s diversity and inclusion aims. The
DAF should seek to expand its toolkit to include further approaches to the problems of representation, inclusion, and bias. Next, we briefly discuss the efficacy of two alternatives that have received particular attention in the literature: barrier analysis and affirmative action.

**Barrier Analysis**

Barrier analysis is a bottom-up approach that seeks to identify potential obstacles to communities obtaining resources or participating in a program. Barrier analysis examines key points in the career life cycle—such as recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention practices—to determine where women and racial and ethnic minorities face obstacles that might account for less-than-proportionate representation among applicants, hires, and senior leadership. Importantly, barrier analysis identifies both problems and solutions. For example, “if a particular hiring requirement is a barrier, the validity of that requirement should be examined to ensure that it is a strong predictor of future job performance and that there are no alternative tools that are equally valid but show less adverse impact” (Matthies, Keller, and Lim, 2012, p. 6). Law enforcement agencies have used barrier analysis to better understand and address the challenge of increasing diversity among their personnel. The Colorado State Police (CSP) is a useful example of this effort. CSP sought to better reflect the demographic diversity within the state of Colorado, but it recognized that awareness, qualifications, and interest in law enforcement were lower in some ethnic communities. CSP enlisted RAND researchers’ help to conduct an exploratory examination of how recruiting and selection policies and procedures related to that objective. Researchers found that barriers to diversity included the composition of the current workforce, the nature of the job, relocation requirements, and the lengthy hiring process. Their recommendations included assessing people’s propensity to apply, determining why applicants drop out, adjusting application windows, exploring strategies to shorten background investigations, and providing a realistic job preview (Krueger, Robson, and Keller, 2019). This type of analysis could prove equally useful in a military context.

**Affirmative Action**

Affirmative action is a top-down approach that has been used to address systemic racism and inequities for many years, but its efficacy has been debated. In contrast to blinding strategies, affirmative action seeks to remedy past discrimination by explicitly using gender and race in selection processes (Back and Hsin, 2019). Many organizations have been reluctant to implement such initiatives because potential employees may perceive them negatively (Wind-
These attitudes may be changing as renewed efforts to reinstate affirmative action continue. In California, Proposition 16 aimed to repeal the state’s 24-year ban on affirmative action, effectively removing rules imposed on the state constitution by Proposition 209, which prohibited government agencies and institutions from giving perceived preferential treatment to individuals on the basis of sex or race (California State Legislature, 2020; California State Legislature, 1996). Moreover, some studies have shown that affirmative action is one of the most effective tools for institutions of higher education to both increase diversity and addressed historical discrimination and exclusionary practices (Maxwell and Garcia, 2019). Given the increasing competition for labor, attracting talent is relevant for the long-term success of the DAF. But there is a potential paradox here: Initiatives that are intended to bring in additional diverse talent can drive away candidates who oppose such practices (Windscheid et al., 2017). However, these negative perceptions were lower among women and were mitigated by a government-mandated quota that negated any negative feelings employees might have had because it was institutionalized (Windscheid et al., 2017). Correspondingly, backlash from instilling quotas or something like the National Football League’s Rooney Rule did not meet resistance once implemented (Patra, 2020). Because the most recent Department of Defense strategy does not include affirmative action targets for the recruitment, retention, or promotion of historically underrepresented groups, affirmative action is less likely to be implemented as an alternative to blinding strategies in the DAF (Kamarck, 2019).

Given the increasing competition for labor, attracting talent is relevant for the long-term success of the DAF.

Considerations for the Department of the Air Force

Several organizations have looked to color-blindness and gender-blindness as ways to advocate equity and equality. The world is beginning to realize that these approaches alone might not achieve their intended goals and, in some circumstances, can be counterproductive. Blinding strategies might not advance the DAF’s overall goal of a force that is blue in its service loyalty but consists of individuals across racial and ethnic groups and genders. The research discussed earlier suggests that this goal requires awareness of racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Recognizing that air and space professionals are members of their respective services—while still acknowledging that individual disparities have existed and still exist—is a step toward building a more equitable force for the future. Having discussed the efficacy of blinding strategies and alternative approaches, we suggest two considerations for the DAF.
Treat the Disease of Inequality, Not Only the Symptoms of Bias

Blinding strategies aim to address the symptoms of bias by, for example, removing photographs from consideration by promotion boards and selection processes (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020; Youseff, 2020). Although this practice might result in a short-term increase in diversity, it fails to address the deeper problems that can drive inequality in military culture, resulting in longer-term attrition of historically disadvantaged communities by mid-career and less representation at senior levels. Focusing on inclusive work environments will enable the advancement of more diverse people and allow more natural talent to thrive. Instead of strictly employing blinding strategies as diversity programs, the DAF should consider the barriers that reinforce inequality and take active steps to reduce them.

Expand the Toolkit Beyond Blinding Concepts and Practices

Blinding practices alone cannot rectify a biased or discriminatory workplace and must be augmented with other tools. Potential further approaches might include awareness and diversity training, barrier analysis, and affirmative action policies (Kalinoski et al., 2013; Roberson, 2019; Martin and Phillips, 2019). Generally, diversity training has a smaller effect on affective-based outcomes (awareness) than it does on cognitive-based (tacit knowledge) and skills-based (changes in behavior) outcomes (Kalinoski et al., 2013). However, diversity training is merely one tool of what should be a compendium of tools to address bias and systemic racism, and research (as discussed earlier in this Perspective) shows that blinding and awareness strategies have the potential to backfire in some contexts. Barrier analysis could assist the DAF in illuminating the underlying conditions that drive the attrition of talented, diverse individuals along the career development journey, resulting in a long-standing lack of diversity among senior leaders. Affirmative action is a top-down approach that can bolster bottom-up barrier analyses by creating a space for diversity and inclusion to rise up the ranks. This approach is not included in current Department of Defense strategy, although it has been implemented in the past. If it were institutionalized, affirmative action could overcome negative perceptions associated with quotas. The DAF should consider the advantages and drawbacks of all these approaches as it seeks to expand its diversity, equity, and inclusion toolkit beyond blinding concepts and practices.
Notes

1 Information on “today’s thinking” was derived from a previous RAND slide presentation (see Lim, 2020).

2 For more information on cognitive roadblocks (also referred to as cognitive biases), see Cheng, 2018.

The mental roadblocks humans tend to throw in front of their efforts to make sound decisions have come to be known as “cognitive biases.” Cognitive biases are so apparent and so inherent that there’s no disputing their existence. (Cheng, 2018).

3 After more than two decades of negative effects on women and racial minorities, such as the devastating impact on minority equal opportunity and access to the state’s publicly funded institutions of higher education, voters rejected the opportunity to reinstitute affirmative action in the November 2020 election. For more information on Proposition 16 and Proposition 209, see Myers, 2020.

4 For more information on the Rooney Rule, see SI Staff, 2017.

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**About This Perspective**

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is considering expanding the use of blinding strategies, and this research provides scholarly context to help shape how and to what order of magnitude blinding might or should be implemented. Instituting blinding strategies should not be a trivial decision. Organizations considering blinding strategies should not view these strategies as a panacea solution to address all forms of disparities. The organizational and individual attributes of the marginalized groups matter as demonstrated by the literature documented in this research.

In this Perspective, the authors also examine how these insights apply in the context of DAF goals of improving diversity and inclusion for members throughout its ranks so that the organization reflects the diversity of the general population. They also analyze other approaches that should be explored and steps that the DAF should take to better advance its goal of a more equitable and inclusive workforce.

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