RESEARCH BRIEF

Filling the General Officer Ranks in the U.S. Space Force

Overcoming Promotions Challenges in a Small Service

The U.S. Space Force (USSF), which was established by law on December 20, 2019, in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, is the United States' newest and smallest military service. Because of its small size, the USSF will likely have more difficulty with filling its general officer ranks than do the other services, which have larger pools of qualified members from which to draw. Cognizant of this potential difficulty, the USSF asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to think about how the effectiveness of general officer promotions could be improved given the relatively small size of the USSF general officer corps.

The research team drew insights from the executive selection processes at several government agencies and private-sector organizations, comparable models in the other military services, interviews with subject-matter experts, and a simulation analysis to define the key challenges that the USSF faces in sustaining its general officer corps and to develop options to overcome these challenges.

USSF General Officer Management Problems

The USSF's general officer corps is made up of brigadier generals (those in the pay grade of O-7), major generals (O-8), lieutenant generals (O-9), and generals (O-10). Title 10, Section 526 of the U.S. Code authorizes 21 USSF general officers and sets the floor for the USSF's contribution to joint positions at six—a significantly smaller number of senior officers than the number contributed by the other armed services. The USSF also manages five officer career fields: Space Operations Officer (13S), Intelligence Officer (14N), Cyberspace Effects Operations (17S), Developmental Engineering (62E), and Acquisition Manager (63A). Given that no military organization manages general officers at quite the same scale as the USSF, it is not surprising that the service faces unique challenges in managing this group of personnel.

Title 10, Chapter 36 of the U.S. Code outlines the promotion procedures for the active components and places the responsibility of selecting officers for promotion in grades O-2 through O-8 in the hands of selection boards—and specifies the requirements for who can sit on those boards. The research team identified three challenges that the USSF faces in executing promotion processes as specified by statute.

The first challenge is having enough viable candidates to allow for a measure of selectivity. In larger services, career fields are structured such that there are many candidates for promotion to each higher grade. As the grades become more senior, there are fewer positions that need to be filled and

fewer candidates but still an adequate number of candidates from the next lower grade. Therefore, the structure is shaped much like a pyramid—a large number of positions and pool of personnel at the lower grades that gradually become smaller at the higher grades.

The pyramid of positions for the USSF's general officers is more rectangular in shape, as depicted in the figure. The 21 general officer positions are arrayed in black rectangles and the six joint positions in purple. From one grade to the next highest grade, the number of candidates from which selection boards can choose to fill individual positions or to fill a series of positions in pursuit of a long-term selection plan is limited—yielding a shape that is more rectangular than a pyramid.

The second challenge is the difficulty of aligning the competencies of selected officers with the competencies required for such a small number of positions. The rectangular shape of officer positions is especially apparent when accounting for functional experience that might be required in a position—as illustrated, for example, in the rectangles outlined in orange in the figure, which require expertise in acquisition, or those outlined in green, which require expertise in intelligence.

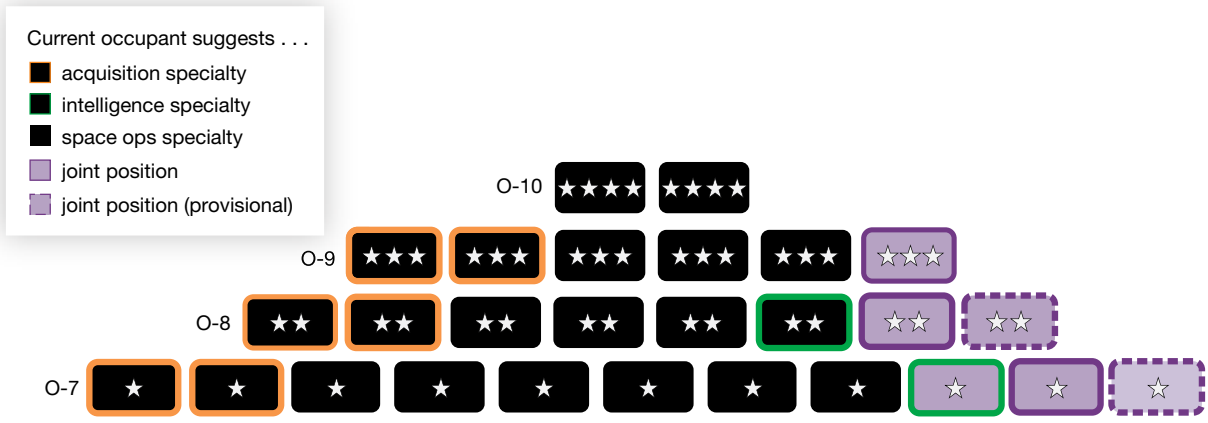
The Department of the Air Force selection board processes currently used by the USSF primarily evaluate candidates on their merit in the abstract and then promote those selected in order of seniority. With a pool of nearly 200 general officers in O-7 and O-8 grades, for example, the U.S. Air Force can afford to promote on merit and still have many options for aligning officer competencies with open positions. In contrast, with the USSF pyramid having 11 O-7s and eight O-8s, it is more likely that a promotion list ordered by seniority will be poorly aligned with the skills needed to fill O-8 positions.

The third challenge for the USSF is difficulty meeting the statutory requirements for selection boards, which are established in U.S. Code, Title 10, Sections 612 and 616. Two areas are problematic. First is selection board membership. A minimum of five officers who are in higher grades than those under consideration will sit on the board, a nonvoting board president at least two grades higher than the candidates is customary, board members cannot serve on two consecutive boards, and boards should represent the diversity of the armed forces.

Larger services have no difficulty meeting these requirements, but they are a challenge for the USSF. The pyramid in the figure shows only 14 total O-8s and O-9s who could serve as O-8 selection board members, and the USSF would need to draw from this entire group to staff annual selection boards with five core members. If enough eligible board members are not available, which is likely to be the case based on simulations analyzed by the research team, the USSF could have to hold selection boards less frequently, which will delay promotions and hinder the flow of officers into vacant positions. A limited pool from which to draw promotion board members also leaves little flexibility for appointing members who represent the diversity of the entire USSF.

Second, the selection board may not promote more than 95 percent of the officers who are eligible for promotion for the first time. The same simulations showed that the 95-percent cap on promotions could make it impossible to select enough officers to fill

The USSF's General Officer Pyramid of Positions



projected O-8 vacancies. The inevitable result would be either periods in which positions are empty or extensions such that officers in grades O-8, O-9, or O-10 must delay retirement until another board can select more O-8s to complete the string of replacements.

An Ideal Promotion Process

There are many steps the USSF could take to resolve these challenges. Before turning to the specifics, however, it is useful to take a step back and consider the purpose of the promotion process and how an ideal process might be characterized. Such a foundation is needed to evaluate alternative promotion policies that the USSF might consider and understand the inherent trade-offs among them.

The ultimate objective of a promotion process is to produce a cohort of senior leaders who have the character and competence to effectively lead their organization. With that in mind, the research team identified and vetted with subject-matter experts five characteristics of an ideal process:

- **Fulfills requirements.** The policies and processes produce a cohort of qualified and capable general officers who meet current and future leadership and technical requirements. The promotion planning process should include a vision of how guardians will be used and developed through promotions and assignments to successive positions during their careers.
- **Fair and trustworthy.** The policies and processes permit a level playing field for all who are eligible to compete through checks and balances that impart trust and clear standards for character and competence.
- **Executable.** The USSF can operate without major administrative burdens or costs. Changes that do not require legislation or major structural adjustments, for example, are more easily executed.
- **Explainable.** The USSF can easily explain the policies and processes to guardians and external audiences (e.g., Congress, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, sister services, the media).
- **Responsive to change.** The policies and processes can be adapted or adjusted to strategic or legislative requirements with minimal disruption and incorporated into the existing process with relative ease.

Options for the USSF's Consideration

Moving forward, the USSF can consider numerous options in developing a promotion system that better meets its needs. Many adjustments that would better synchronize the competencies of selected officers with those required for open positions can be made without legislative change. But, in some cases, targeted legislative relief might be needed. These options, which cover succession planning, promotion board composition, and the alignment of assignment and promotion processes, are presented in order from the most to least executable.

Align Selection Decisions with Succession Planning Needs

Because of the USSF's small general officer corps, matching officer competencies with positions will be more difficult than in its sister services with larger groups of officers from which to select. This problem is also particularly acute for the USSF because nearly all its general officer positions require specific functional competencies. Consequently, as part of its general officer promotion planning process, the USSF will need to exercise rigorous workforce planning to anticipate future retirements and promotions. These planning results should then be used to set both minimum and maximum requirements for specific competencies that are provided as guidance from the service secretary to promotion boards.

Increase Flexibility of Promotion Board Composition and Selection

The USSF needs greater flexibility in establishing promotion boards in cases in which there are not enough available officers to meet statutory requirements for board composition. In addition, the statutory selection cap of 95 percent of promotion zone candidates will regularly have an adverse effect on USSF general officer promotions. Three options would help:

- **Expand promotion board eligibility.** To reduce the adverse impacts of too-frequent board duties among officers, the USSF can seek a legislative change for limited use that would allow appropriately qualified Senior Executive Service members to sit on boards. Such a provision could be made applicable specifically to the USSF or, with appropriate coordination, to all the services.

- **Remove the selection rate cap**. Because of the selection rate cap, the USSF will not be able to promote the number of general officers needed to sustain its required O-8 inventory, even if well-qualified officers on their second or subsequent consideration are available. Relief will require a legislative change to exempt the USSF from the 95-percent selection rate ceiling for O-8 selection or, at a minimum, apply the ceiling to the total number of officers meeting the board, not only the O-8s.
- **Authorize multigrade promotions.** The number of candidates for O-8 positions will be small—especially so for positions with acquisition and intelligence requirements, with only one intelligence candidate and two acquisition candidates competing for promotion. In both specialties, the number of vacancies could realistically exceed the number of eligible candidates with the right competencies.

One approach to increasing selectivity would be to allow O-6s (colonels) to compete along with O-7s for promotion to O-8 and to eliminate the time-in-grade requirement for O-7s to become eligible for promotion. This approach significantly deviates from traditional promotion frameworks; thus, gaining support for it could be challenging.

Nevertheless, this proposal is similar to existing flexibilities granted to the services. It roughly parallels current provisions in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 601, that allows O-7s, or any other officer, to be considered for appointment as an O-9. It also mirrors provisions in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 9037, that waives time-in-grade requirements for O-6s to compete for the O-8 position of Deputy Judge Advocate General. Similar provisions are in place for the Chief of Chaplains. However, if such flexibility cannot be obtained, the USSF should consider restructuring its general officer grade requirements to make them more sustainable.

Align Assignment and Promotion Processes

The research team heard about many options that the USSF could consider to better align assignment and promotion processes—some of which reflect more significant deviations from current processes, which more typically follow the standardization principles and structures set by the 1980 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act. Nonetheless, the following are approaches that address known problems faced by the USSF:

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- **Recommendation board construct.** The USSF's general officer requirements might be small enough to warrant a more radical departure from the typical selection board process—that is, to convene a board for each vacancy to recommend a qualified candidate or candidates to the Secretary of the Air Force for selection. This recommendation process could also incorporate the multigrade promotion feature. Two implementation approaches could be considered: (1) Treat every O-7 and O-8 position for a USSF officer as a unique position, with officers in the grade of the position and grade below considered for the position or (2) invoke this recommendation process only after a decision is made that a position will not be filled by reassignment of an officer already holding the grade of the position. This board construct would virtually guarantee that each officer selected for promotion would meet the functional competency requirements of the job, but it would also have the effect of making every USSF officer assignment subject to Senate confirmation.
- **Reserve vacancy promotion constructs.** A similar matching of individuals to specific jobs could be produced through the use of pro-

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cedures similar to the provisions for reserve vacancy promotions. Officers are selected for potential promotion or recognition through a board process and their names are submitted for Senate confirmation, but the promotion is not made until a selectee occupies a position at the higher grade.

- **A pure rank-in-position system.** Greater flexibility in aligning individuals and their grades with position requirements could be gained if promotions and assignments were melded into a single consideration, referred to as *rank-in-position*. This would be similar to the process used for appointments to O-9 and O-10 positions in which there is no competitive recommendation process but increased scrutiny of candidates' capabilities. Such a process is a complete departure from competitive board processes currently used for O-7 and O-8 and would create a need for Senate confirmation of every O-7 and O-8 assignment action.
- **Promotion sequencing.** When officers are selected for promotion, they are placed on a promotion list in order of seniority. If this promotion list sequence were eliminated, it would allow a closer alignment of promotions and assignments. Statutory language to implement such a change would need to include provisions for tiebreakers.
- **Conventional assignment flexibilities.** Title 10 of the U.S. Code provides the services with flexibilities and authorities that can be leveraged to improve the alignment of assignment and promotion processes. These include such flexibilities as permitting grade substitution (O-7s filling O-8 requirements), taking selective retirement actions, allowing general officers who have broadened backgrounds to serve in more than one functional capacity, conferring general officer authorities to capable Senior Executive Service members, frocking (awarding officers the next grade or title before formal promotion can take place), and recalling retired general officers to duty.

Fit to Criteria

When evaluating these alternatives, it is important to understand how well each option addresses known problems and meets the criteria of an ideal promotion system, as shown in the table. Aligning succession decisions with succession planning needs is a fundamental step. It requires no statutory authorities and is a good human resource management practice in all respects. Increased flexibilities are needed by the USSF in both board composition and selection constraints and, although some of these options could meet resistance from Congress and receive lower marks for executability, the practical problems associated with meeting current statutory requirements might require working through the execution challenges.

Although the options to align assignment and promotion processes would go a long way to help fulfill requirements, they are problematic when considering transparency, executability, and explainability. Conventional assignment flexibilities, which might be somewhat less effective, is the most favorable option among these approaches to overcome the practical challenges inherent in the basics of general officer management and planning.

The USSF can use this trade space—aligning alternatives to the characteristics of an ideal promotion system—to evaluate these and other alternatives as the process of developing its promotion system progresses.

Fit of Alternatives to Criteria

Alternative	Criterion				
	Fulfills Requirements	Fair and Trustworthy	Executable	Explainable	Responsive to Change
Align selection decisions with succession planning needs	●●	●	●	●	●●
Increase flexibility of promotion board composition and selection					
Expand promotion board member eligibility	✖	●	●	●	✖
Remove selection rate cap	●●	●	▲	●	●
Authorize multigrade promotions	●●	●	▲	▲	●●
Align assignment and promotion processes					
Recommendation board construct	●●	▲	■	▲	●●
Reserve vacancy promotion constructs	●●	▲	■	▲	●●
Pure rank-in-position system	●●	▲	■	▲	●●
Promotion sequencing	●	▲	■	▲	●
Conventional assignment flexibilities	●	●	●●	●●	●

NOTE: ●● = most favorable; ● = favorable; ▲ = marginally favorable; ■ = unfavorable; ✖ = not applicable.

Policy Recommendations

Among the options discussed, the following rise to the top as the best courses of action for the USSF to pursue in the near term. These recommendations focus on the most executable and adaptable options that would help the USSF fill its general officer requirements:

- Provide comprehensive minimum and maximum competency guidance to O-7 and O-8 promotion boards, based not only on expected vacancies but also on overall succession planning.
- Propose legislative changes for three additional flexibilities:
  - a request for the 95-percent selection rate cap to apply to the total number of eligible officers rather than those on their first promotion look
  - the ability to use members of the Senior Executive Service as selection board members
  - the authority to consider O-6s for promotion to O-8.
- Employ all available conventional assignment flexibilities to address challenges in aligning personnel with promotions.

This research brief describes work done in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Recommended Approaches for General Officer Promotions in the U.S. Space Force: The Stars Above*, by David Schulker, Lisa M. Harrington, Albert A. Robbert, Bart E. Bennett, Nelson Lim, Gina Oliver, Lewis Schneider, Irina A. Chindea, Kimberly J. Lichte, Joshua Klarich, and Kelly Atkinson, RR-A2113-1, 2024 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA2113-1). To view this research brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA2113-1. RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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