A Methodology for Determining Air Force Education Requirements Board (AFERB) Advanced Academic Degree (AAD) Requirements

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Summary

The United States Air Force’s current process for producing advanced academic degrees (AADs) requires career field managers (CFMs) to predict specific AAD-coded billet vacancies three to five years before they occur and then submit these requirements to the Air Force Education Requirements Board (AFERB) to fill those projected vacancies. Based on the reported vacancies and other criteria (such as the Chief of Staff’s priorities), the AFERB provides quota allocations; any CFM requirements that do not receive a quota allocation become unfunded quota requirements. After an officer earns an AAD, the Air Force Personnel Center assigns the officer to an AAD-coded billet vacancy. The ideal result should be a 100 percent match rate between the Air Force–funded AADs earned by officers and the education requirements of the corresponding AAD billet vacancies, irrespective of the number of funded quota allocations allotted at the AFERB.

However, our analysis of 8,447 AAD assignments for officers who earned AADs from FY2000 through FY2010 shows that only 58 percent of officer assignments to master’s degree billets and 33 percent of officer assignments to doctorate degree billets were made such that the officer’s degree level and academic specialty matched the billet requirement. One reason for the low percentage of proper assignments is that the AAD assignment process does not deliberately match officers who have previously earned an AAD to unfunded quota requirements. Furthermore, our analysis points to a lower-than-desired utilization rate of officers who have earned Air Force–funded AADs.

Our analysis also shows that the career points at which personnel earn AADs are misaligned with the AAD billet grade structure. An analysis of FY2010 data shows that the number of personnel with Air Force–funded master’s degrees falls short of requirements in early years of service, but exceed requirements by the sixth year of service. Similarly, the number of personnel with Air Force–funded PhDs falls short of requirements until the grade of O-5. The majority of Air Force–funded master’s and doctorate degrees are earned by O-3s and mature O-4s, respectively, making the filling of lower-grade requirements for these degrees with personnel in the designated grades infeasible. This misalignment contributes to the difficulty of placing officers holding the right AADs into the proper AAD-coded billets.

1 A quota allocation provides tuition dollars and student man-years for an officer to volunteer to earn a specific AAD and ultimately fill the previously identified billet vacancy.
To aid the current AFERB process, RAND created modeling tools that use historically derived tenure in AAD-coded billets to estimate the required AAD production and to recommend an initial distribution of quota allocations to Air Force specialty codes (AFSCs) and academic institutions based on the number of AAD-coded billets on the unit manning document (UMD); these modeling tools are to be piloted in the FY14 AFERB. The models’ outcomes corroborated the analysis and findings discussed above.

Recommendations

While RAND’s model estimates a gap between the number of quota allocations that should be funded annually and the actual number of funded quota allocations in recent years, it is unlikely that increased funding will become available to reduce that gap. Consequently, our recommendations focus on reducing the level of AAD production currently needed to meet requirements by more effectively using personnel with AADs. Our specific recommendations are as follows:

- **Modify the assignment process by placing a higher priority on matching personnel with AADs to AAD billets.** The Air Force can increase the return on its investment in graduate education by more deliberately matching officers who have earned AADs to unfunded quota allocations.

- **Examine whether the grade structure of AAD billets can be adjusted to better match the supply of personnel with AADs and/or fund AADs earlier in officers’ careers.** Alignment of these two factors (grade requirements and when officers earn AADs) could allow for a higher utilization rate of Air Force–funded AADs and increased tenure in AAD positions.

- **Increase tenure in AAD billets after graduation to reduce the AAD production requirement.** The model results indicate that O-4s spend less time in AAD-coded billets versus other grades overall: 1.41 man-years in master’s degree and 2.3 man-years in PhD positions, respectively, versus a minimum of 2.3 man-years in master’s degree and 2.6 man-years in PhD positions in the other grades.