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# Talent Management and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Department of the Air Force

## Qualitative Review of Programs, Practices, and Partnerships

## KEY FINDINGS

- Department of the Air Force (DAF) recruiting and accession sources aim to increase the diversity of the applicant pool while not limiting opportunities to applicants from underrepresented groups.

- Demonstrating diversity is a key consideration in marketing information and recruiting events.

- Partnerships play a key role in extending reach into diverse communities and building networks to optimize recruiting efforts.

- Few career field representatives offered details on marketing and recruiting, but some discussed changes to accession standards to increase the recruiting pool.

- Career field representatives cite work-life balance and other challenges for women's advancement and retention.

- Formal processes are used to track diversity trends for key assignments and promotion.

- Literature highlights cultural and communication barriers to successful implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs in the DAF.

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) has placed a strategic focus on improving talent management, including how to build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce. To support the DAF's efforts, in fiscal year (FY) 2021, RAND Project AIR FORCE was asked to (1) provide targeted benchmarks and a planning tool that will allow the DAF to evaluate the demographic composition of the active duty workforce overall and functional areas in this workforce, and (2) identify practices and opportunities that the DAF can use to support diversity in critical career fields. As part of the second objective, we conducted

a qualitative review of talent management programs and practices in the DAF and in the private sector. This report describes internal DAF efforts to address talent management from a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens. Specifically, we offer a snapshot of FY 2021 existing and planned DEI efforts in a select number of DAF enlisted and officer career fields and across DAF recruiting and accession sources. We supplement our review with available literature on past Air Force DEI efforts. The goal of this report is twofold. First, we describe what the DAF is doing regarding DEI and talent management, including potential gaps or limitations. Second, we identify proactive efforts in different DAF career fields or

accession sources that the DAF could consider applying more widely.

## Approach

We conducted a qualitative review of the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. Space Force (USSF) DEI-related programs and practices using two primary sources of information: (1) subject-matter expert (SME) interviews and (2) a literature review.[1] In this section, we outline our approach; additional details are provided in Appendix A.

### Subject-Matter Expert Interviews

We conducted two sets of SME interviews. The first involved interviews with career field managers (CFMs) and other career field representatives to identify existing and planned talent management programs and practices for their career fields, including any involving DEI, and opportunities for improving DEI in their career fields.[2]

From April to May 2021, we conducted 20 interviews with 29 individuals who oversee or represent 41 enlisted and eight officer specialties, including those across the DAF (i.e., in the USAF and USSF).[3] (Unless otherwise indicated, all mentions of interviews in this report refer to these author interviews.) Enlisted specialties were selected for inclusion based on their demographic workforce mix: four had underrepresentation of women and/or racial and ethnic minorities, three had roughly average representation, and ten had above-average representation.[4] Officer career fields were selected based on historical underrepresentation of women and racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., pilots) and sponsor interest. We initially contacted 22 CFMs. We conducted 17 interviews with CFMs and representatives (five officers, 12 enlisted) for a career field response rate of 77 percent.[5] Table 1 summarizes the number and type of interviews conducted with career field representatives.

From May to June 2021, we conducted six interviews with 12 DAF recruiting and accession source SMEs to understand existing and planned programs and activities for marketing, outreach, and recruiting

TABLE 1

## Summary of Interview Participants (Career Fields)

| Career Field Category | Number of Interviews | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Operations | 8 | 14 |
| Logistics | 2 | 3 |
| Support | 6 | 6 |
| Acquisition and Financial Management | 1 | 1 |
| Other[a] | 3 | 5 |
| Total | 20 | 29 |

[a] The other interviews were based on referrals from CFMs we had interviewed. Two interviews were with representatives who offered more details on marketing and recruiting efforts for their career fields; two participants were involved in each interview. The third interview was with a representative from Headquarters Air Force (HAF) who could speak to strategic-level efforts in one of the functional communities.

and whether any address DEI. Table 2 summarizes the number and type of interviews by recruiting and accession source. Eight of the 12 participants were leadership-level representatives from recruiting and officer accessioning sources. Four were Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) Gold Bar recruiters representing different geographic sections of the United States.[6] These recruiters were recommended to us by an AFROTC interviewee. The sponsor's office provided the initial points of contact for the three sources.

For our interviews, we used a structured approach to identify themes and cull specific examples of DEI programs and practices. Additional information on our interview approach and analysis can be found in Appendix A.

### Review of Literature

We also conducted a literature review to find evidence of effective DEI policies and practices in the DAF in recent years.[7] Details of our search method and themes are described in Appendix A. Focusing on recent publications, our search yielded only 11 relevant sources. These sources did not tend to focus on successful implementation of DAF DEI policies and programs but instead on the challenges of successful implementation. Moreover, the 11 sources included several theses and dissertations. Therefore, our literature review is narrow in scope, has limited peer-reviewed sources, and focuses on cultural

aspects that could limit successful implementation of DEI policies and practices.

It was beyond the scope of this report to include a broader review of the DEI literature. For a discussion of that literature, we refer readers to a companion report, *Talent Management and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Private-Sector Organizations: A Qualitative Review of Promising Practices* (Hill et al., 2023).

### Major Themes

Previous research suggests that increasing the number of women and racial and ethnic minorities in some areas of the DAF has been challenging (Lim et al., 2014; McCone and Scott, 2009; Pendlebury, 2015). For example, women and racial and ethnic minorities remain a small minority of the pilot community and, more specifically, the fighter pilot community (Leong, 2010; Roux, 2013), and low representation of women and minorities in the pilot corps is a barrier to promotion to senior levels in the Air Force. The enlisted corps has a much higher accession rate for minorities than the officer corps but appears to experience issues related to retention and promotion, which become more pronounced at the senior levels for enlisted airmen (Kirkpatrick, 2018). Our interviews provided information on how the DAF has recently addressed issues with demographic diversity, including promoting equity and inclusion.

TABLE 2
## Summary of Interview Participants (Recruiting and Accession Sources)

| Recruiting and Accession Source | Number of Interviews | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Air Force Recruiting Service (AFRS) and Air Education and Training Command (AETC)[a] | 3 | 3 |
| AFROTC[b] | 2 | 5 |
| U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 6 | 12 |

[a] One interview was with a representative from AETC, whose directorate works closely with AFRS Detachment 1, which was established to attract and recruit the best talent from diverse backgrounds.

[b] One interview included four AFROTC Gold Bar recruiters.

## DAF Recruiting and Accession Sources Aim to Increase Diversity of Applicant Pool While Not Limiting Opportunities to Applicants from Underrepresented Groups

Discussions with recruiting and accession sources reveal that efforts are underway to focus on DEI in marketing and recruiting. However, direct targeting to demographic groups is limited to marketing efforts (e.g., ensuring advertising includes demographically diverse airmen). Recruiting activities focus on diversity indirectly. Recruiting and accession sources emphasize the importance of promoting diversity (which they tend to describe in terms of demographics) while not explicitly focusing on demographic characteristics in decisionmaking (i.e., not showing any form of partiality toward any group). For example, USAFA's use of geographic diversity targeting of underrepresented districts, or *opportunity districts*, reflects a focus on Congressional districts that nominate fewer applicants than other districts, while also acknowledging that lower-nomination districts also tend to be more demographically diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged than higher-nomination districts.[8] As another example, AETC's Rated Preparatory Program provides opportunities for airmen who have previously expressed interest in becoming rated to get exposure to being in Air Force aircraft. Although experts who spoke of this program indicated that racial and ethnic minority groups and women might have fewer opportunities for aircraft exposure, program participation is not targeted toward underrepresented demographic groups.[9] Therefore, such programs appeared to work by lessening barriers for underrepresented demographic groups without showing preference for a demographic category.

Other recruiting and accession sources have defined processes that present unique challenges when attempting to increase diversity. Specifically, AFROTC recruiters and leadership we interviewed acknowledge that scholarship requirements "are not built to seek out diversity" and focus heavily on test scores, not weighing other criteria, such as personal statements and recommendation letters, that can also measure potential success. Hence, applicants are not able to explain why they would potentially be a good officer. Important attributes, such as will and determination, are not fully evaluated given the heavy focus on test scores in the existing process.

Indeed, previous research suggests that one issue for racial and ethnic minorities in joining the DAF is its heavy reliance on standardized tests, such as the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), ACT, SAT, and Air Force Officer Qualifying Test. Certain racial and ethnic minority groups tend to score lower on these tests, on average, which means that (all else being equal) fewer minorities on average will be able to join the DAF and access the opportunities afforded by joining (Roux, 2013; Pendlebury, 2015).[10]

## Demonstrating Diversity Is a Key Consideration in Marketing Information and Recruiting Events

Although the DAF might not directly target applicants from specific demographic groups, they do attempt to achieve greater demographic diversity among recruits and applicants through marketing and recruiting events. DAF recruiting and accession sources aim to have diverse representation in marketing information and at outreach and recruiting events. For example, interviewees noted that the ability to speak languages other than English is taken into account when selecting admission advisors for the USAFA and Gold Bar recruiters for AFROTC, because this can open lines of communication with diverse communities. In addition, when asked about the criteria for selecting volunteers for diversity-oriented events, one accession source described the need to connect to the audience: "Demographics are huge. If we go to a WAI [Women in Aviation International] event, we want to have females. [For an] OBAP [Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals] event, we want Black aviators." However, even when seeking volunteers whose demographic characteristics align with the market audience for an event, efforts are still made to send a diverse team to reflect the diversity the DAF is trying to espouse.

Interviewees also noted that having diverse representation among recruiters and admissions advisors at events or meetings with diverse local communities helps build bridges with diverse candidate bases and helps facilitate communication with communities that are otherwise distrustful of the military. As a USAFA representative explains:

> As we [the Academy] continue to get candidates into the pipeline, and we get young folks into the Academy, it gets easier as [the Academy cadets] come home for Christmas. They are able to talk about their experiences [with their local communities]. That is helping us build. It is that relationship. The Native American organizations are very distrustful, but when young folks come out from their organizations, that helps. If we keep the relationship going (not disappear) that's how we build.

Hence, reflecting diversity when marketing and recruiting potential candidates is a key strategy across recruiting and accession sources.

## Partnerships Play a Key Role in Extending Reach into Diverse Communities and Building Networks to Optimize Recruiting Efforts

Our recruiting and accession source interviewees emphasized that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to recruiting; different geographic areas require different recruiting strategies. During our interviews, we heard that building relationships with the local community and influencers is imperative.[11] AFROTC Gold Bar recruiters stressed the importance of school counselors and leveraging of local resources, such as newsletters, to reach diverse populations. They also emphasized the importance of educating influencers about the DAF and its opportunities, with one recruiter commenting: "Unless the student has a family member or counselor who is familiar [with the DAF], it takes a while to explain what the [AFROTC] program is."

USAFA takes a different approach, focusing more on direct outreach to potential candidates instead of parents while still acknowledging the importance of influencers. Based on our interview with USAFA admissions representatives, USAFA contracts with advertising agency GSD&M to conduct market research, including holding focus groups, to better understand its targeted audience.[12] As a result of these efforts, USAFA revamped its website with less focus on messaging to parents because USAFA determined that parents might not serve as the most-effective influencers in lower socioeconomic communities. USAFA is running media campaigns, including a Snapchat campaign, to increase brand awareness among candidates and their influencers. In addition to marketing, USAFA relies on admission liaison officers who live in particular communities to build networks in the community. These liaison officers were described by an interviewee as "boots on the ground." Notably, USAFA previously implemented several initiatives that were quickly threatened with cancellation because of budget issues or a lack of systematic evalu-

ation (Vila, 2012), which suggests limited long-term interest at USAFA in relevant programs.

Formal sponsored partnerships with national organizations, such as WAI and OBAP, are also a part of the recruiting strategy. We were not provided specific data on the return on investment for these partnerships in terms of leads or eventual accessions.[13]

## Few Career Field Representatives Offered Details on Marketing and Recruiting, but Some Discussed Changes to Accession Standards to Increase the Recruiting Pool

When asked about marketing, outreach, and recruiting, the majority of CFMs and career field representatives we interviewed noted that they do not have insight into DAF recruiting for their career fields. Several commented that CFMs do not oversee recruiting because it is the purview of AFRS and accession sources. Only five CFMs addressed specific marketing and recruiting efforts for their career fields. Two CFMs (one enlisted, one officer) said they had worked on recruiting videos for their communities, although neither noted that the videos were developed with DEI in mind. Three enlisted CFMs from the special warfare and combat support community mentioned the Scout-Recruit-Develop

The preference for pilot candidates to have private pilot licenses might create challenges for candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

program run by AFRS. According to AFRS and AETC representatives familiar with the program, the program involves contract "field developers" who work on physical conditioning and resiliency with special warfare recruits to prepare them for the rigors of special warfare training. The AFRS and AETC representatives also noted that the special warfare and combat support community engages in marketing and recruiting efforts for women and persons of color, particularly those with athletic backgrounds. For example, the special warfare community's (330th) recruiting squadron will take part in events with sports and fitness organizations, such as Super Girl Surf Pro, to market their community to women with strong fitness backgrounds.[14] They also engage Historically Black Colleges and Universities to participate in events. They mentioned videos and other engagements that aim to feature members of their community who are women or from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Unlike recruiters, CFMs play an active role in setting entry (accession) requirements for their career fields. Three enlisted CFMs and career field representatives explicitly mentioned ongoing or planned changes to entry requirements in the hopes of broadening the pool of recruits. One CFM noted that there have been changes to physical testing for the special warfare community to ensure that the tests did not inadvertently create adverse impact for women. Two enlisted CFMs mentioned that they recently recommended reducing or had already reduced the minimum required scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) or on one or more of the mechanical, administrative, general aptitude, and electronics (MAGE) tests.[15] Both CFMs noted that the motivation was to increase the pool of recruits, with the hope of also increasing the diversity of that pool. As one CFM described, "[We're] looking at [entry] standards to see if we're creating barriers where there shouldn't be any. I don't have any hard data at the moment. We didn't go crazy; we just dropped the ASVAB by 5 points, but that helped increase our diversity."

Although officer CFMs and career field representatives did not indicate plans to change accession requirements to address DEI, one did highlight that the preference for pilot candidates to have private

pilot licenses might create challenges for candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds:

> Some people didn't have private pilot's license but have multiple jobs and [are] going to school. If having private pilot's license isn't required, why are we showing it? Where do you break out the dedicated work ethic, where they would do great in any career field, versus someone who just has a private pilot's license. We want people to help complete the mission. You can teach any of the skills in the Air Force.

## Career Field Representatives Cite Work-Life Balance and Other Challenges for Women's Advancement and Retention

When CFMs and career field representatives were asked about DEI-related challenges involving training, development, advancement, and retention in their career fields, five indicated that there are challenges for women when it comes to pregnancy or taking care of children while balancing a career.[16] Participants who raised the challenges for women included both those with lower-than-average female representation and those with average or higher levels of female representation, suggesting no general pattern to comments on this topic. No other demographic category or type of DEI issue was raised by more than two CFMs and career field representatives.[17] Although challenges for women were mentioned, some CFMs acknowledged that they do not have formal programs to retain women. As one enlisted CFM put it:

> We don't have anything . . . formal policies and practices in place [for women when and after they have children]. After they have a baby and go back to work, they leave. Get out. Transfer to another job. Stay at that level. How can I have female chiefs when I don't have a pipeline [of women at lower grades]?

This same CFM noted that he and his team have been trying to understand reasons that women do not stay and advance, citing lack of role models and confidence in their ability to make a career in the community: "[Women in the AFS] would say they don't see a future/career [in this AFS]. The other part of it is challenging folks too. I would ask some women who are senior NCOs [noncommissioned officers]. There were a lot of confidence issues." Relatedly, previous research on the effect of mentoring in the DAF concluded that the DAF does not provide sufficient training on existing formal mentoring programs and does not track sufficient information regarding the effectiveness of informal mentoring programs (Roux, 2013; Streeter, 2013).

In our interviews, two communities discussed concerted efforts to retain women.[18] One enlisted CFM highlighted a women's working group that is developing a guide for supervisors and leaders when confronted with challenges that women tend to face in their career field. An officer CFM and representatives discussed the efforts in the Mobility Air Forces (MAF) and Combat Air Forces (CAF) communities to address challenges that women in rated fields face. These efforts are highlighted as examples of proactive DEI efforts later in this report.

## Formal Processes Are Used to Track Diversity Trends for Key Assignments and Promotion

When asked about specific training, development, and advancement-related efforts in their career fields, a majority (ten out of 17) of CFMs and career field representatives noted the importance of vectoring for key senior-level positions in the career field and development team (DT) boards.[19] Four of the five officer career field interviewees specifically indicated that demographic diversity is considered for DT boards, whether by ensuring demographic representation of board members or by conducting barrier analysis of the DT board results (i.e., analyzing whether the demographic distribution of those who were in the candidate pool for the board match the distribution among those who were selected by the board).[20] However, two of these four interviews included discussion of limitations.[21] One interviewee discussed the challenge of finding enough women to serve on DT boards:

> When developing DTs, it can be hard to find more diverse populations of airmen. We're

always looking for women and minorities on the board because we need more perspectives. But we don't have many colonels who are [from underrepresented demographic groups]. We end up using the same one or two women over and over again. Then we're giving an outsized voice to a small minority, just one or two people who otherwise wouldn't have it.

Another interviewee noted issues with interpreting results of the barrier analyses:

Sometimes there will be an observation and they'll say there are 75 candidates [going in front of the DT board] and only four are "X"— pick your diverse category—and they'll say it doesn't seem right. [But] there hasn't been an analysis from the point of accession [to determine why the candidate pools that meet the boards are not more diverse].

Although several enlisted CFMs and career field representatives mentioned vectoring personnel for senior enlisted positions, a few specifically mentioned not using demographic information in such decisions. One CFM noted that although demographic information is not considered, a less-subjective process has helped get more women selected:

In the past, [there was] a lot of hand picking [for vectored positions]. [Leaders would think:] "Hey, I know that guy or girl." [Unlike those leaders,] I let their records speak for themselves. Two years ago, it was the same people going to vectored jobs. Now, in doing it differently [i.e., not hand picking], we see a lot of people filling vector jobs that we didn't see before. Now we look at what's next for this person in terms of development. Now, women are given opportunities to fill vector jobs—they did well in those jobs—and they were able to get promoted.

Other than DTs and vectoring, topics involving career field efforts to address DEI considerations in development, advancement, or retention did not rise to the level of common themes.

## Literature Highlights Cultural and Communication Barriers to Successful Implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies and Programs in the Department of the Air Force

As seen through our interviews, many of those who try to further diversity appear to be attempting to maneuver in the culture and the presumed legal context, instead of attempting to change the culture. For example, programs aimed to address inequitable opportunities for particular groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities) are offered to everyone because of concerns of legality and of potential backlash from members of the majority groups. Additional work needs to be done to modify culture. The literature we examined identified culture-related and communication challenges to the DAF's successful implementation of DEI policies and programs. We offer three examples of culture-related challenges from this literature.

- A lack of focus on policies to address family issues creates stress during the midcareer point when women, particularly officers, are more likely to start having children (King et al., 2020).
- Women at USAFA have experienced issues associated with tokenism, wherein women who succeed at USAFA are treated as exceptions and women are subjected to other stereotypes (McCone and Scott, 2009).
- DAF members who identify as multiple underrepresented sociodemographic groups (e.g., identifying as a bisexual Black woman) could face increased scrutiny regarding their success in the DAF because of perceptions that they have received a greater level of unfair support than individuals who fit into only one of these categories (Pendlebury, 2015).

In addition to these examples of culture-related barriers, the literature we examined suggests that the DAF has faced challenges in clearly communicating why and how it is implementing specific DEI policies and programs.[22] Insufficient communication can lead to misperceptions about the policies and programs whereby some majority members might

believe that women and racial and ethnic minorities are being unfairly provided preferential treatment (Pendlebury, 2015; Roux, 2013). For example, following the unveiling of the 2015 Air Force diversity initiative, some vocal critics raised concerns about the initiative, indicating that they believed that the initiative would result in quotas for certain demographics and thereby undermine the Air Force's merit system (Blom and Davis, 2016). Clarifying the goals and implementation of DEI policies could decrease perceptions that these policies are discriminatory or undermine the merit culture.

## Examples of Proactive Efforts to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Department of the Air Force

Below, we describe proactive efforts that the DAF is implementing or pursuing. We use the term *proactive efforts* to connote strategies, plans, initiatives, programs, and activities that are, by design, meant to promote DEI. We abstain from using such terms as *best practices* because many of these efforts are in their initial stages or have not been evaluated to determine whether they achieve the desired outcomes.

We highlight six sets of proactive efforts to promote DEI in the DAF as of FY 2021. The first three come from recruiting and accession sources, whereas the latter three come from discussions with CFMs and career field representatives.

### Burgeoning Efforts to Increase Rated Diversity Through Detachment 1

AFRS Detachment 1 was established to promote rated diversity, specifically goal 1 of the Rated Diversity Initiative Strategy: "Attract and recruit the best talent from diverse backgrounds to cultivate a high performing and innovative Air Force reflective of the best in our nation."[23] To accomplish this task, Detachment 1 sponsors many programs—including Aviation Inspiration Mentorship (AIM) Wings, AIM High, GO Inspire, and Pathways—that focus on inspiring interest in the DAF among preaccession and accession-aged youth and young adults.[24] These marketing and recruiting efforts rely on AIM rated officer volunteers to support events. In addition to using internal volunteers, Detachment 1 forms partnerships with external organizations, such as WAI and OBAP, to meet its mission. Some of these partnerships require paid sponsorships (in the area of $50,000 to $75,000), whereas others are with organizations that actively pursue partnerships with the DAF at no cost to build awareness of DAF opportunities among their members or participants. According to our interviews with AFRS representatives, GSD&M vets potential partners; however, no organization can partner with the DAF if its membership is exclusive to any particular demographic. At the time of this writing, we were not provided information on the return on investment of time or money for partnerships (e.g., whether specific partnerships yield more leads and eventual accessions than would be expected from other forms of marketing and recruiting, such as investing more into their online presence).

### Reducing Barriers Through Aviation Familiarization

AETC created the Rated Preparatory Program to familiarize airmen in nonrated fields—both enlisted and officers—with flying (Pettway, 2021). As noted in an interview with an AETC representative, one of

> Insufficient communication can lead to misperceptions; some might believe that women and racial and ethnic minorities are being unfairly provided preferential treatment.

Because U.S. Congressional districts nominate applicants for USAFA, the academy's admissions office developed a geographically based diversity strategy for outreach and recruitment that focuses on underrepresented districts.

the program goals is to prepare participants for rated training courses, and with a little over 40 percent of applicants coming from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups, the program is indirectly working to address performance barriers in testing among racial and ethnic minorities. Our interviewee expressed the underlying motivation of the program as follows:

> If you have never been on an airplane before, you don't have any exposure, and it is difficult for us to come up with a test question that is going to predict your success if you have no framework.

The program's initial class had high demand with 400 applicants, mostly enlisted airmen, for 60 available spaces.[25] This prompted the creation of a selection board to select applicants. Race and gender were not considered when selecting program participants: "We cannot take the [underrepresented demographic groups] and set them aside

because we would get into legal trouble," said one interviewee. Although applicant demographics are not considered in these boards, diversity among board members is desired, and the demographics of those selected by the board can be analyzed. AETC is working on data tools to examine how well those who go through this program perform in their careers; however, the applications are "early in development," per an AETC representative familiar with the program.

The program is focused not only on pilot training but also on other rated career fields, including remote pilots and combat system operators. Most of the seats are reserved for officers.

## Opportunity Districts for Targeted Recruiting for the Air Force Academy

Because U.S. Congressional districts nominate applicants for USAFA, the academy's admissions office developed a geographically based diversity strategy for outreach and recruitment by focusing on opportunity districts. These districts also tend to be more demographically diverse and more socioeconomically disadvantaged than higher-nomination districts. Once USAFA identifies opportunity districts, it acquires lists of high schools in those districts to target for outreach. USAFA's admissions liaison officers (second lieutenants who are USAFA cadets and are from or familiar with the districts) will engage the schools' Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs or others (e.g., high school counselors) and assist with applications for the academy. As one USAFA representative explains:

> We try to get into these [high] schools. They don't know about us. We try to get into the school by building partnerships. Usually, [Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp] is in the school. This gives us access to the school. We look for influencers to get penetration.

USAFA also leverages GDS&M to conduct marketing research and purchase media advertising in the area. According to USAFA admissions repre-

sentatives, this model has reduced the number of opportunity districts (listed at 89, or 20.5 percent of the 435 districts, as of 2021), meaning that those districts have provided more applicants since the targeted marketing and outreach began.

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Climate in Enlisted Civil Engineering Career Fields

Leaders in the DAF's enlisted civil engineering career fields have fielded surveys to understand the DEI climate in these areas. The survey was developed in one of the civil engineering career fields and, according to a CFM we interviewed, is available for all civil engineering career fields. This interviewee explained that the motivation to create the survey stemmed from a lack of information about why that community was struggling with diversity:

> No one was answering the questions. No one is asking why. If you go to the diversity literature, no one says how you get to your deltas and figure out where your problem areas are. We envision what right looks like and how you get to your "right." I want to make sure that there are equal opportunities. With regards to females, these are things that were coming in their way to being equal. My thought process is [to ask]: what are the things I cannot see that are getting in the way?

This CFM found that their biggest challenges were for women in the career field. This has already led to work on a policy that provides women more flexibility in how they can wear their hair on duty (e.g., wearing a ponytail instead of a bun). The career field also established a women's working group that is building a strategic plan and creating a handbook for supervisors and leaders on how to address common situations that women face (e.g., what to do if a woman in the unit becomes pregnant). A few months after the women's working group was established, the career field established a diversity working group that focuses on race and ethnicity issues. Both groups are working on ways to communicate guidance to the career field. In addition to working groups, the career field is looking into DEI-related training for supervi-

sors and leaders. The career field's efforts with the climate survey paved the way for other civil engineering communities to adopt a climate survey, indicating the importance of having CFMs and other career field leaders as champions to help gain and sustain momentum on DEI efforts.

## Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for Intelligence and Cyber Communities

At the time of the writing of this report, the deputy chief of staff of Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Cyber Effects Operations (A2/6) had been developing and implementing a diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategy. The strategy builds on discussions with representatives from the HAF/A2/6 community. Its three pillars are Continuing the Conversation (communication), Opportunities to Accelerate (leadership development), and Advocacy & Allyship (education and training). Below are details on the goals and key programs and activities in each pillar.[26]

1. **Continuing the Conversation:** This pillar focuses on the community having discussions about difficult D&I topics through monthly focus groups with personnel in the community to understand specific D&I concerns. The pillar also includes issuing a quarterly newsletter called *In the Loop* to communicate D&I efforts to the community.

2. **Opportunities to Accelerate:** The goal of this pillar is to address inequities in professional opportunities. Key activities include (1) examination of demographics of candidate pools for key leadership positions with the goal to have more-diverse candidate pools and (2) a leader development program called LEVEL Up (*LEVEL* stands for "Leaders Equitably Valued at Every Level"). This program is designed to last about 6 months and is styled after executive coaching programs in industry with the goal to create a "culture of diverse leaders." Although the program was originally slated to target underrepresented demographic groups, it has since been changed to be open to all airmen (military and civilian).[27]

3. **Advocacy & Allyship:** The goal of this pillar is to promote "systemic change" in D&I through education and training by creating *allies* (i.e., members of majority group who advocate and support issues affecting members of under-represented groups). A key activity includes hosting a Diversity & Inclusion Day (a virtual conference) semiannually.

According to our discussion with an HAF/A2/6 representative familiar with the D&I strategy and activities, implementation of the strategy had been ongoing and activities have evolved based on feedback from the field (specifically through focus groups under the first pillar).

## Addressing Barriers for Women and Families in Mobility and Combat Air Forces Communities

In 2020, the CAF began an initiative called Sword Athena, which is "designed to identify, tackle and present solutions to female and family-centric barriers to readiness using crowd-sourced topics and a Mission Area Working Group (MAWG) model" (Yates, 2021). The 2020 Sword Athena event focused on women's hairstyle requirements, nursing stations in units, and rules regarding saluting and military dress at child development centers. By teaming up with the DAF's barrier analysis working group's Women's Initiative Team (WIT), the Workplace and Training MAWG was able to "champion a proposal for women to wear low ponytails and braids," which the Commander of Air Combat Command then advocated in a memorandum to senior DAF leadership (Yates, 2021).

The MAF community has followed the CAF's example by establishing its Reach Athena initiative.[28] According to MAF representatives we interviewed, the Reach Athena initiative goes beyond the large virtual events that CAF has for Sword Athena. As one MAF representative explained:

> With headquarters WIT and major command partners, we do symposium work. We have podcasts, not just for the DT. We have social media, [bringing in the] spouse perspective. When it comes to DT, there is nothing yet

but maybe in the future as we work with [Air Mobility Command's personnel community in] A1K.

This MAF representative went on to explain that there are biweekly meetings (via a working group) and that recent focus has been on communication with the MAF community:

> Focus is on messaging for our current initiatives, interviews with senior leaders. Spotlight on childcare federal program and airmen stories. [In vitro fertilization], same-sex [relationship] struggles, [etc.]: things [the community members] don't talk about often.

As the MAF community builds its Reach Athena initiative, it is still figuring out how to promote initiatives as bandwidth for those involved appears to be a challenge.

## Conclusions, Implications, and Considerations for the Department of the Air Force

We found several examples of programs, practices, and partnerships in our qualitative review of DAF's internal DEI efforts. Stakeholders from recruiting and accession sources state that diversity is intrinsic to all marketing, recruiting, and outreach efforts. However, such efforts appear bounded in scope, and do not directly target underrepresented demographic groups except in terms of representation reflected in marketing and outreach (e.g., demographically diverse airmen in advertisements or at events). Beyond marketing and outreach, concerns with legal restrictions on use of demographic information comes into play. Indeed, such concerns were mentioned in almost all our interviews with recruiting and accession sources. However, no DAF-specific policies or regulations were cited as guidance to direct diversity efforts without violating laws.[29]

For their part, CFMs and career field representatives cited the importance of DEI, but any DEI-related efforts discussed generally fall under existing approaches to career field management, such as adjusting accession standards to broaden (and potentially diversify) the applicant pool and analyz-

ing the demographic trends from DT boards and related board selection processes for senior-graded positions. The CFMs and career field representatives who discussed proactive efforts that fall outside these existing approaches tended to represent communities with underrepresentation of women or racial and ethnic minorities and also have a vested interest in promoting such efforts. The implication is that if a CFM or other career field leader who is a champion of DEI moves on and is replaced by one who is not, the momentum behind proactive DEI efforts can fade or even reverse.

In our interviews and literature review, we did not identify a single type of DEI effort that was common across the career fields or recruiting and accession sources we interviewed. However, we did identify examples of proactive DEI efforts. These are summarized in Table 3.

What our interviews and literature review did *not* reveal were systematic efforts to evaluate whether such proactive efforts are achieving their desired end states. Some interviewees noted that they believed

programs were achieving their goals but did not offer specific details on how those were being measured. Others noted that the efforts were too new or that they were working on developing a system to collect metrics. For example, the AETC division with oversight of the Rated Diversity Improvement Plan (and that funds Detachment 1) is building data tools to examine career outcomes for those who went through the Rated Preparatory Program. However, others did not provide a clear explanation for why more-detailed demographic information is not captured. For example, such metrics as number of events completed for AFROTC Gold Bar recruiters appear agnostic to the type of event completed (e.g., diversity related or not), so such measures as percentage of events focused on recruiting diverse populations might not be readily available to enable objective analysis of the intrinsic consideration of diversity in DAF's marketing and recruiting efforts. Given the limited information in the DEI literature on best practices for DEI, the DAF's DEI efforts would benefit from more evaluation in the long term. **In par-**

TABLE 3

## Summary of Proactive DEI Efforts in the Department of Air Force in FY 2021

| Proactive Effort | Brief Description |
|---|---|
| AFRS Detachment 1 | This organization executes the first goal of the USAF Rated Diversity Improvement Plan to attract and recruit talented youth from underrepresented groups. |
| AETC's Rated Preparatory Program | This program exposes airmen who are interested in rated careers to flying in hopes of preparing them for such careers. It does not directly target women and minorities but was established, in part, because underrepresented groups tend not to have prior exposure to flying. |
| USAFA opportunity districts | USAFA targets marketing and outreach in Congressional districts that undernominate applicants for the academy. These districts tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged and demographically diverse. USAFA sends cadets who act as admissions liaison officers to engage high schools and other organizations in the districts. |
| Civil engineering DEI climate surveys and related efforts | Stakeholders in enlisted civil engineering career fields have fielded surveys of the DEI climate to understand barriers. At least one career field has acted on survey results to develop communication materials and guidance for supervisors and leaders on addressing barriers, especially for women. |
| HAF/A2/6 D&I strategy | This functional community-developed strategy addresses three pillars: Continuing the Conversation, Opportunities to Accelerate, and Advocacy & Allyship. HAF/A2/6 leverages focus groups with the community to get feedback on programs and initiatives, including its LEVEL Up program, which is an executive coaching–style program for leaders in the community. |
| Sword Athena (CAF) and Reach Athena (MAF) | Via its Athena events and efforts, the CAF and MAF communities are crowdsourcing information on issues affecting women and families in their communities. They are also leveraging podcasts and other media to share stories and are teaming with HAF groups (e.g., DAF's barrier analysis working group) to address policy barriers for women (e.g., regulations on women's hairstyles). |

**ticular, the DAF should consider the following to evaluate and sustain its DEI efforts:**

- develop clear measures of progress tied to DAF DEI goals and use data to assess the effectiveness of DEI-related practices and programs
- provide tools to encourage more career fields to assess their workforce needs and evaluate DEI practices
- use an information system to capture details on DEI practices in DAF communities and ensure practices are evaluated and, if effective, sustained

A recent report on U.S. Coast Guard gender and racial and ethnic minority representation provides a helpful framework for linking DEI strategic goals to initiatives and outcomes (Lim et al., 2021).

**In addition to evaluating and sustaining existing DEI practices in the DAF, the DAF should consider leveraging effective DEI practices from other organizations in both the private and public sectors.** Examples of promising DEI practices from other organizations are described in detail in a companion report by Devon Hill and colleagues (2023). With a robust framework to support evaluation and sustainment of DEI efforts, the DAF should be able to

readily integrate effective DEI practices used by other organizations to fill gaps in what is in use at the DAF.

## Appendix A. Methods

This appendix provides additional details on the two primary methods used in this report: interviews and literature review.

### Interview Method

We used the same general approach for conducting the interviews for CFMs and career field representatives and for recruiting and accession sources. All interviews were conducted remotely (most through Microsoft Teams, a few by conference line) and were semistructured, following a protocol relevant to the type of interview. CFMs and career field representatives were asked questions on the following topics:

- interviewee background (position and tenure)
- overview of career field *health* (i.e., whether the career field is meeting its goals in terms of recruiting and accessions, manning, and retention)
- whether demographic diversity is a focus in the career field
- for each of three segments of talent management—(1) marketing, outreach, and recruiting; (2) training, development, and career advancement; and (3) retention:[30]
  - challenges (if any) for their career field and whether such challenges vary by demographic group
  - existing and planned programs and practices for their career field, including details on the goals and structures of programs and practices, any metrics or evaluation of their effectiveness, and whether any are DEI focused
  - any other kinds of opportunities (even if not planned) that could address the talent management stage for their community (e.g., recruiting more individuals), and whether such opportunities could vary by demographic group

The Department of the Air Force should consider leveraging effective diversity, equity, and inclusion practices from other organizations in both the private and public sectors.

- magic wand question: "If you had a magic wand and could change one thing about Air Force recruitment and retention to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Air Force—without worrying over time or resources—what would you change?"

Interviews with representatives from recruiting and accession sources covered the following topics:

- interviewee background (position and tenure)
- existing and planned programs and practices used for outreach, marketing, and recruiting, including details on the goals and structures of the programs and practices, any metrics or evaluation of their effectiveness, and whether any are DEI focused
- existing and planned partnerships with external organizations, schools, or companies, and how the partnerships were formed (or are being formed); any metrics of evaluation of their effectiveness; and whether any are DEI focused
- challenges with forming and maintaining external partnerships (in general) and factors associated with successful partnerships
- magic wand question (same as for CFM and career field representative interviewees).

For each interview, at least one team member facilitated while another took notes. These notes served as the primary data source for analysis. To analyze the interview notes, the team first developed thematic codes based on primary topic areas from the two interview protocols. Two team members, who facilitated the majority of interviews, independently coded two of the 20 CFM and career field interview notes to ensure consistency in coding. They discussed any discrepancies, made slight adjustments to the codes to clarify intent, and then split the remaining sets of notes to code. One of the coders then merged the results and extracted themes. For the recruiter and accession source notes, one of the team members who coded the CFM and career field representative protocols developed the coding structure (using the interview protocol as a guide) while the other team member coded the six notes files. This approach was taken because of the small number of interviews for recruiters and accession sources (six

versus 20 for CFMs and career field representatives). The team member who developed the coding structure reviewed the coding results for the recruiting and accession source interviews to ensure consistency in coding.

## Literature Review

To find publications on relevant DEI initiatives, we entered the following strings into Google Scholar:

1. US "Air Force" AND (diversity OR inclusion OR minority OR women OR "African American" OR Hispanic OR underrepresented) AND (initiative OR program OR review)
2. US "Air Force" AND "diversity policy".

Google Scholar was chosen as the primary search engine for the literature review because of both the small quantity of relevant literature and the platform's ability to find literature published in multiple online scholarly databases. We limited our search to 2006 through 2021. Our initial search generated thousands of returns. To filter the large volume of returns, we sorted by relevance and then reviewed for applicability to the topic of focus: potential effectiveness of recent-era DAF DEI policies and practices. For the first (longer) string above, we reviewed all sources for applicability. For the second string, only the first 100 sources were reviewed after initial sorting for relevance given the large volume of hits and decreasing relevance as we continued our review. We excluded sources that addressed diversity-related issues in the DAF but that were not tied to talent management (e.g., DAF demographic group differences in tobacco use) and sources that discussed only historical diversity trends without connecting those trends to recent DAF DEI policies and practices (e.g., women's contributions to aviation during World War II). In total, we found 11 relevant sources (seven using the first string, four using the second string).

The sources contained several methods of analysis for programs, including case studies, surveys, and demographic analysis. Furthermore, the articles contained diversity issues relating to both female and underrepresented minorities across the career life cycle. Three articles touched on religious minorities (Kirkpatrick, 2018; Pendlebury, 2015;

Pendlebury, 2020). There was a heavy bias toward discussion of diversity as it related to the Air Force Officer Corps; ten of the 11 reviewed articles covered diversity among officers. In addition, three articles focused exclusively on diversity issues in the USAFA (Pendlebury, 2015; Pendlebury, 2020; Vila, 2012).

To identify themes from the 11 sources, one of the authors read through the sources, generated summaries, and then extracted themes. These source-specific themes were then compared across the 11 sources to generate the five overarching themes:

1. DAF culture lacks a focus on D&I for women and minorities.
2. Structural issues in the DAF prevent it from reaching its D&I goals.
3. There is a lack of formal mentoring programs or a lack of training and participation for existing mentoring programs.
4. Diversity training is largely overlooked in the officer corps.
5. The DAF Office of D&I is immature.

In general, the literature themes focus on challenges or gaps in the DAF's D&I policies and programs.

## Notes

[1]  Our interview sample included more USAF than USSF career fields. In addition, the available literature on prior DEI-related practices almost exclusively focuses on the USAF as much of the literature predates the USSF.

[2]  CFMs represent functional communities (which can include multiple specialties) and provide a central role in management and oversight of their career fields. Air Force Instruction 36-2670 lays out their responsibilities, which include implementing policies for the career field, developing career-planning guidance, providing oversight of career field education and training requirements, supporting accessions and training processes, and coordinating force structure changes (Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2670, 2020, pp. 14–15).

[3]  We count as a *career field* the set of Air Force specialties (AFSs) that a given CFM oversees because CFMs can oversee more than one AFS. Among the CFMs or representatives interviewed, the average number of AFSs they oversee or represent is 2.7 (standard deviation = 2.78). To protect the identities of CFMs and representatives, we do not list the names of specific AFSs.

[4]  Some career fields we selected were above average for certain racial and ethnic groups but not for women, and vice versa. We aimed to have a blend of career fields based on varying levels of gender and racial and ethnic representation. The demographic workforce results come from an analysis by RAND as part of the larger project on which this report is based. The team analyzed active duty enlisted personnel data provided by the DAF. Analysis focuses on the most recently available FY's data, specifically FY 2020.

[5]  In addition to these 17 interviews, we conducted three interviews based on referrals from three CFMs we had interviewed. See Table 1 for details on these other interviews.

[6]  Gold Bar recruiters are second lieutenants selected to serve in one-year recruiting positions to "inform prospective cadets of Air and Space Force career opportunities and the [Reserve Officer Training Corps] scholarship program" (Manske, 2020). According to the AFROTC chief of recruiting, the Gold Bar Recruiting Program has the mission to "inspire, engage and recruit talented and diverse men and women into our Air and Space Forces" (Manske, 2020).

[7]  Although we included USSF experts in our interviews, literature on previous efforts focuses on USAF because literature on USSF is still nascent.

[8]  U.S. Congressmembers nominate young adults from their Congressional districts for the military academies. Hence, the USAFA focuses its outreach and recruiting on districts.

[9]  More details on the USAFA opportunity districts recruiting strategy and AETC's Rated Preparatory Program are described later in this report in a section on proactive efforts for DEI.

[10]  We are not arguing that these standardized tests are unfair but that they exhibit what is known as *adverse impact* against certain demographic groups. Adverse impact refers to significant group-level differences in results on assessments, such as standardized tests, that are used to make important educational or employment decisions. For a detailed discussion about adverse impact in employment, see Outtz, 2010.

[11]  *Influencers* are individuals, such as parents and peers, who offer guidance to potential recruits about their job and career opportunities (including whether they should join the military).

[12]  GSD&M provides marketing and analysis support to AFRS as well.

[13]  *Leads* are "individuals who appear to possess, or who may in the future possess, the potential and qualifications for enlistment or appointment as a commissioned officer in a military service" (Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2032, 2019, p. 273).

[14]  For more information, see Super Girl Surf Pro's website.

[15]  AFQT is derived from a population-normed composite of subtests from the ASVAB, a key aptitude test that recruits take to qualify for enlistment in the U.S. military. In addition to using AFQT, the DAF combines scores from several different ASVAB subtests to create test scores in four aptitude areas known collectively as *MAGE*. The MAGE cut scores vary by AFS, depending on the types of aptitudes the AFS requires (e.g., an AFS with several duties requiring high levels of electronics aptitude will have a higher electronics minimum cut score than an AFS that does not require as high a level of electronics aptitude). CFMs play a key role in setting the MAGE cut scores, as well as other entry standards (e.g., preferred or required high school courses).

[16]  Participants were first asked about training, development, advancement, and retention issues, in general, for their career fields. Very few raised any specific issues. In fact, several CFMs noted that their retention levels are fairly "healthy," perhaps, in part, because of the pandemic's impact on civilian job opportunities.

[17]  Career fields with above-average representation levels of women and racial and ethnic minorities were not as prone to mention efforts geared toward DEI, whereas career fields with known challenges for gender or racial and ethnic representation raised specific issues that they are trying to address.

[18]  For a more-detailed discussion and analysis of women officers' retention in the DAF, see Keller et al., 2018.

[19]  According to Air Force Instruction 36-2670, *vector* refers to a

> development team/enlisted development team collective recommendation for an assignment level (e.g., Joint Staff, Headquarters Air Force, major command, installation-level, etc.), training, or education opportunity (e.g., resident developmental education, advanced functional training), or position type (e.g., flight commander, division chief, instructor, special duty, etc.) a member should be considered for in his or her next or subsequent assignments (Department of the Air Force Instruction, 2020, p. 323).

More generally, DTs manage force development for personnel in their community, with separate DTs for officers, civilians, and enlisted personnel. DT responsibilities include identifying relevant education, training, and experiences in the community; using assessments of manning and career field health to make vectoring decisions; balancing manning and utilization needs for the community; developing career fields as needed; and conducting barrier analysis to address "negative trends" for demographic diversity in the functional community (Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2670, 2020, pp. 21–22; 31–33).

[20] A related DEI challenge raised by another interviewee involves how officers are selected for intermediate developmental education (IDE), which is considered for promotion to lieutenant colonel. The participant raised concerns with how commanders apply the Definitely Attend (DA) policy for IDE, which ensures officers an IDE slot (i.e., DA-designated officers do not have to compete for a slot). The participant noted that some commanders might not use the DA option in a way that best meets the needs of the DA-designated officers' career fields and that this policy could have unintended consequences for IDE demographic diversity.

[21] The December 2020 DAF Inspector General report, which addressed racial disparities, noted limitations with the DTs' barrier analyses, even noting that HAF acknowledges that some DTs do not put in the level of effort needed to conduct full barrier analyses (Department of the Air Force Inspector General, 2020).

[22] We do not argue that the DAF has been completely opaque about its diversity-related efforts over the years. For example, in July 2021, the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center released results from its diversity survey (Bela, 2021). DAF has also published or commissioned reports that are in the public domain and provide, for example, statistics on its demographic composition. What the literature on past DAF DEI policies and practices suggests is that the DAF has missed opportunities to communicate the why and how of specific DEI policies and programs so that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the motivation for implementing those policies and programs.

[23] U.S. Air Force, 2021, p. 6.

[24] According to information provided by Detachment 1, AIM Wings are Air Force wings established to execute the Rated Diversity Initiative. These wings have ambassadors and host local outreach events. There are currently three such wings recognized. AIM High refers to a program that sends rated officers to attend outreach events and flying exposure activities. GO Inspire connects general officers with recruiters to target demographic groups or areas where recruiters struggle to recruit. Pathways refers to an educational program for youth to learn about careers in aviation. There are videos and live question-and-answer sessions with mentors from diverse backgrounds.

[25] Enlisted applicants that are selected for the program must apply to an officer commissioning source, and officer selectees must apply for Undergraduate Flying Training upon program completion (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2021).

[26] The description of the pillars is based on a one-page handout provided from a HAF/A2/6 who was involved with strategy implementation. This participant shared a copy of the handout; however, all quoted material comes from interview notes.

[27] A HAF/A2/6 representative noted that when LEVEL Up was originally proposed to target underrepresented groups, they hosted focus groups and received feedback from the community that was not favorable of limiting the program to certain groups. HAF/A2/6 used this feedback to adjust the program eligibility.

[28] There is no official website for Reach Athena; however, there is a podcast on Spotify.

[29] In 2010, a Military Leadership Diversity Commission legal subcommittee reviewed laws governing diversity policies with a focus on legal context for military diversity. The subcommittee

noted that the military "has limited flexibility in designing programs to enhance the demographic diversity of its members . . . [in adopting] policies that apply different standards in admission, accession, assignment, promotion, or separation decisions based on an individual's race, color, ethnicity, gender, or religion" (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010, p. 2). The subcommittee concludes that "policies that use different standards in . . . *decisionmaking* based on suspect class membership are *not* likely to pass legal muster without a very strong justification and very careful program design" (p. 2). That is, it is technically possible for the military to implement tailored programs for targeted demographic groups, but the legal risk in doing so is high.

[30] Many CFMs commented that they are not aware of specific marketing, outreach, and recruiting efforts. For these CFMs, we bypassed questions about marketing, outreach, and recruiting details and moved on to questions about training, development, and career advancement.

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## About This Report

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