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Hitting the Books Before Military Service Policy Options for Recruiting in the College Market

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The armed services prefer to recruit “high-quality” youth (those who have a high school diploma and score in the top half of the score distribution on the Armed Forces Qualification Test) because of their better performance and lower attrition. However, with wage growth greater for college graduates than for high school graduates, high-quality youth are increasingly interested in attending college. This trend is forcing the military to look more closely at its traditional recruiting market—recent high school graduates and high school seniors—and focus on those individuals who are in college, have recently left college, or have immediate college plans.

The services already have implemented several educational assistance programs to make military service more attractive to college-bound youth; these programs will continue to be important. However, to be fully engaged in the college market, the services must refine existing programs to enhance their effectiveness and consider what the next generation of programs should look like to target various segments of the college market. RAND Corporation researchers recently conducted a study to help the services in this effort.

National Survey Tested Hypothetical Programs

The RAND researchers developed, implemented, and analyzed a national survey of 2,580 individuals aged 17 to 21 in three groups: college-bound high school seniors, current college students, and individuals who have recently stopped attending college and not received a degree, i.e., the study’s so-called college dropouts. The survey described a series of hypothetical recruitment programs and asked respondents to rate their likelihood of enlisting under each program.

The hypothetical programs would allow individuals to attend college before entering the military. However, the college dropouts also were offered a choice of programs that would allow them to enlist

Key findings

RAND found that incentives are effective in recruiting individuals from the college market into the military. They include

- the Loan Repayment Program (LRP), i.e., repayment of federal college loans
- increases in enlistment bonuses and college stipend benefits
- programs that allow college dropouts to enlist without first returning to college.

Of these, the LRP was found to be the most cost effective for the military.

right away. The programs varied in terms of five policy attributes: (1) amount of military entry pay and size of enlistment bonus, (2) amount and type of college stipend or benefit, (3) length of time the stipend benefit would be paid, (4) restrictions on which college majors the recruits could pursue, and (5) restrictions on which career fields recruits can work in once they enter the military.

College Market Youth Are Attracted to the Loan Repayment Program

Survey respondents expressed a positive propensity to enlist with the college Loan Repayment Program (LRP). The LRP produced an increase in enlistment propensity in excess of 50 percent. It would take a 35 percent pay raise, an increase in the enlistment bonus to \$50,000, and an increase in the monthly stipend to \$2,100 per month to achieve the same effect as the LRP.

The researchers also found that the LRP would be the most cost effective of the different policy attributes. However, this assumes that LRP recipients would use only about 25 percent of the poten-

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RAND Survey Tests Options Modeled After Army's "College First" Program

The hypothetical recruiting programs offered to participants in the RAND survey do not exist in the combinations described, but they were modeled after the Army's "College First" program and include several features that do exist in that program. College First is one of a handful of new programs designed to respond to a recruiting dilemma: The military needs high-quality individuals, but high-quality individuals want to go to college. Unlike the Montgomery GI Bill, which pays for college after service, College First provides financial help to individuals to attend college before they join the military. College First may offer

- repayment of up to \$65,000 in federal college loans
- a college stipend of between \$250 and \$350 per month for two years of college
- entry into the military at a higher rank (E-4) after college
- eligibility for an enlistment bonus of \$6,000 or more.

tial \$65,000 benefit, or \$16,000. This usage rate is reasonable based on FY 2000 actual Army LRP usage rates. But if the usage rate increased to 75 percent, for example, the LRP option would no longer be more cost effective than stipends or bonuses.

The high level of responsiveness to the LRP option suggests that the recent growth in the Army's LRP budget makes sense. As recruiters devote more effort to the college market and the program becomes better funded and more easily available, potential recruits are likely to find this option relatively attractive.

In other findings, the survey indicated that military pay, enlistment bonuses, and college stipend benefits positively affect youths' attitudes toward college-before-enlistment programs. The military's

recent improvements in all these areas will increase the attractiveness of the military to college market youth.

The survey also found that requirements that limit an individual's choice of college major or military career field would have a negative effect on enlistments. The college dropout group, in particular, reacted negatively to potential restrictions on their choice of military career field. Members of this group may be more resistant to the restrictions because they are more likely to be employed and already attached to certain career fields. The military's small, existing programs (such as the Navy's tech-prep or CASH [College Assistance/Student Headstart] programs) that allow individuals to tie their college major with their military career field can increase enlistments, but broad application of these requirements across the college market will be met with less enlistment interest.

The survey corroborates the importance of college dropouts as a source of high-quality recruits. Allowing college dropouts to enlist directly without first returning to college was associated with a stronger stated enlistment interest. However, the survey confirmed earlier findings that some dropouts leave college for financial reasons, so they might be receptive to programs that offer resources for college.

New Programs Require Appropriate Infrastructure and Resources

The RAND researchers recommend that, if new enlistment programs suggested by the survey are to be successful in the college market and reach their full potential, the services must have in place an appropriate management infrastructure to support them. For example, recruiters should be selected, trained, and provided the necessary resources to ensure that they are motivated and able to successfully reach individuals in the desired college market. An incentive mechanism for recruiters should explicitly reward the recruitment of college market youth, even if it means that recruits are in the Delayed Entry Pool for extended periods of time while they attend college. Furthermore, the services will need to establish and maintain an advertising campaign that supports the recruiters' efforts on college campuses and in other places where high-quality youth can be reached. ■

This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Policy Options for Military Recruiting in the College Market: Results from a National Survey*, by Beth Asch, Can Du, and Matthias Schonlau, MG-105-OSD, 2004, 146 pages, \$28, ISBN: 0-8330-3568-1, available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: order@rand.org). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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