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Better Coordination Is Needed to Manage the Enlisted Force in the U.S. Air Force

In September 2004, the active-duty enlisted component of the United States Air Force comprised about 298,000 airmen. These airmen, spanning nine grades, performed duties in about 200 specialties. Dedicated enlisted strength managers have never matched the inventory of people to manpower requirements for personnel in all grades and specialties. This is partly because the Air Force uses three major independently managed systems to determine strength by specialty and grade: the manpower system, the strength management system, and the enlisted promotion system. As a result, policies and procedures occasionally work at cross-purposes.

For example, the promotion system policy of equal selection opportunity (ESO), which calls for the total promotions from a grade to be distributed to each specialty in proportion to the number of eligible members in that specialty, runs counter to the goal of satisfying authorizations for enlisted personnel by grade. This is because authorizations are not proportionally distributed by specialty and grade. Having met the manpower requirement for a given grade and specialty, strength managers are usually forced to retrain people to move into or out of a field, or to offer selective reenlistment bonuses to meet the manpower target at the next-higher grade in that specialty.

Research by RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) is helping the Air Force better align its enlisted force management systems. While researchers do not suggest that the Air Force modify ESO, they do suggest the following near-term and long-term steps to improve the overall system:

In the near term, the Air Force should take the following steps:

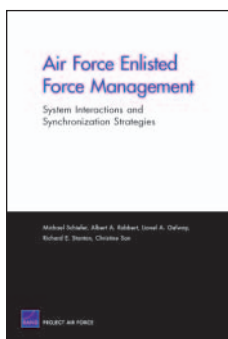
- **Pursue the Department of Defense Directive 1304.20 (1984) goal of ensuring that personnel management system capabilities are taken into consideration during the requirements determination process.** Enlisted strength managers should collaborate with career field managers and manpower managers to establish acceptable, executable manning targets, by grade, for each specialty while simultaneously preserving aggregate grades and specialty skill level requirements.
- **Upgrade some of its personnel modeling capabilities.** A maintainable, steady-state enlisted model with both grade and year-of-service dimensions is essential to establish executable targets. An inventory projection model is also needed that ages the enlisted force along similar dimensions and is sensitive to compensation-related retention effects.

In the long term, the Air Force should take the following steps:

- **Manage the enlisted force using a common metric.** Managers currently use a variety of metrics, leading to management initiatives that are not synchronized. The Air Force should define the range of interchangeable grades that it can live with from an assignment perspective, and then modify manpower, strength management, and promotion policies so the personnel community can manage to those groupings.
- **Develop an overarching control structure.** Enlisted personnel management is currently fragmented, and no single office can control or be held responsible for the health of the force. An overarching control structure would lead to better synchronization between critical players and more effective management of the enlisted force. ■

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