

Restructuring the Air Force Officer Career Progression System

Squadron Officer School Class 16B Group 2

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The Air Force 30 Year Strategy: A call to the Future” postulates the need to change the current Air Force officer progression system and develop new approaches for officer development. In it, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Mark A. Welsh III states, “This strategy provides a general path of where we need to go to ensure our Air Force meets the needs of our great nation over the next 30 years.”¹ The notion that our current officer progression system is outdated is in the undertones of Gen Welsh’s statement and that notion is one hundred percent correct. The Air Force’s current system was founded from Cold War principals and does not create an environment where officers can gain an extensive breath of experience in addition to career field specific depth. Moreover, the Air Force has failed to provide innovative promotion and assignment system processes that promote a “mission first, people always” mindset, allowing for increased retention. This proposal outlines methods to overhaul the current officer progression system by restructuring our assignment system, modifying officer promotions, and refocusing the Air Force’s efforts on education and training by initiating new life-long learning opportunities.

The 2015 National Security Strategy makes a call to “safeguard our national interests through strong and sustainable leadership.”² It identifies four areas in which our leaders must be well prepared to make sound decisions that positively impact our nation; security, prosperity, values, and international order. The successful execution of this strategy will rely heavily on the ability of our Air Force officers, more specifically our company grade officer (CGO) corps, to exercise critical thinking in their decision-making. Moreover, the CGOs have direct ties to those four interest areas on a daily basis. It is our charge to ensure our officers’ development is not only well rounded, but deliberate in its execution, allowing for the development of sound decision makers ready to safeguard our nation’s security.

1. Mark A. Welsh, III. 2014. "A Call to the Future: The New Air Force Strategic Framework." *Senior Leader Perspective*, May-Jun: 7. Accessed October 17, 2015.

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/aspj/digital/pdf/articles/2015-May-Jun/SLP-Welsh.pdf>, 5.

2. Barack Obama, “National Security Strategy” (February 2015), 1.

In the Air Force 30 Year Strategy, General Welsh stated, “Without a more creative concept for continuum of service, we may find ourselves out of step and face more difficulty retaining the creativity and innovation in leadership we will require at all levels.”³ It is with this premise that he issued the charge of developing a more creative, innovative and diverse officer corps. This proposal aims to discuss four possible courses of action (COAs) which address the Chief of Staff’s charge and give the Air Force the flexibility required to adapt to the challenges of twenty-first century warfighting. Through the course of research, four valid COAs emerged which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

ASSIGNMENT PROCESS

The first COA revolves around the assignment system process. The current system for officers is based on Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) and rank in a particular location, and is largely ran and controlled by the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC). Any efforts toward vectoring officers toward experiences they will need for higher command, cataloging skills, and intentional development are haphazard at best. Most officers do not talk to their functional area managers before receiving an assignment, but rather submit their “dream sheet” via a system called the Airman Development Plan (ADP). Refusal of an assignment equates to resignation within seven days. Furthermore, receiving a hardship assignment, such as a deployment, remote tour, or a thankless staff job, are cited as ways to “pull ahead” of the pack, and thus a willingness to sacrifice appears to be aligned with rewards in terms of promotion.

Our recommendation is that the Air Force allow officers to apply directly, in coordination with their current and future leadership and ultimately approved by AFPC, for the positions that best fit their needs. The assumption made here is that an officer knows his or her specific needs related to an assignment better than anyone else, especially the further they are in their career. At a minimum, we need to allow officers the feeling that they have some level of control in their assignment destiny. How would we implement this? The good news is: a total system overhaul is not required, but rather a tweak of the current process. The Air Force already advertises assignments via the Assignment Management System (AMS) robot, which directs emails to all members of specific AFSCs in order to inform them of certain types of jobs. Examples of the

3. Welsh, “Call to the Future,” 9. 2014.

types of jobs advertised are executive officer positions, aide-de-camp positions, and instructor positions at the officer commissioning sources: the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) detachments, and the Officer Training School (OTS). If usage of these email system was expanded, then all jobs could be advertised and applied for in a similar manner.

The new process will require a new human resources management system in which AFPC coordinates assignments as opposed to initiating assignments. During the 1990s, a similar program called the Officer Volunteer Assignment program was in effect.⁴ This system allowed officers to volunteer for assignments and protected them from involuntary moves until approximately 15 years of service.⁵ The system was eventually decommissioned, due to a lack of volunteers for certain positions.⁶ The recommended program would avoid this concern, as commander involvement is required.

Initially, commanders will provide a list of qualifications to AFPC as position descriptions. This generates commander involvement from the initial steps of member selection. AFPC will then publish a description of the assignment, as well as the needed qualifications. After publishing the qualifications and assembling the application package, AFPC will provide the documentation process, completing the front end of the coordination process.

Here, commanders will take a principal role in choosing the right member for each position in the unit by reviewing the resumes and applications. By allowing on-site commanders, who are aware of the unit's needs and idiosyncrasies, to make hiring decisions, the right qualifications and experience for positions can be obtained. In order for the process to thrive, commanders will be expected to hire members in the best interest of their units as a whole, not members who will further any non-mission based goals.

After the commanders make hiring decisions, AFPC will complete a final review of all assignments to determine if the hired member meets requirements for the positions and whether there are any duplicate hires of the same member. In implementing this process, the responsibilities of AFPC will be altered. AFPC will become a coordinating agency for the PCS process, as opposed to the initiators of assignment system. There will be fiscal costs associated

4. Bruce Callander. "The New Way of Officer Assignments." Air Force Magazine, June 1998: 64-67.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

with changing the system. Some of these costs will be mitigated by utilizing the framework of the EQUAL-Plus system currently in existence for enlisted assignments. This will be combined with the already in place ADP to assist officers in making long-term career plans. Additionally, the daily activities of personnel will be altered. Instead of identifying which members are eligible for assignments and matching them, their responsibilities will be focused on the application process and verifying eligibility for assignments. Fewer personnel overall will be required under the new process, however, as the coordination of assignments will require fewer man-hours that the original initiation of them.

Finally, by providing officers more involvement in their assignments, there will be greater job satisfaction. A study of US Army soldiers indicated that 64% of officers felt “having assignments more tailored to their personal preferences would have a significant impact on their decision to leave active duty.”⁷ These officers showed reforms to the assignment and personnel system would have significant impacts on job satisfaction.⁸ By providing officers with an assignment they requested, officers are significantly more likely to show job satisfaction and, in turn, remain in the Air Force.

PROMOTION & PROGRESSION SYSTEM RESTRUCTURING

The second COA will alter the Air Force officer progression system, which has been stagnant in its processes to develop and mature its officers for years. The Air Force focused on the “one size fits all” approach with the Career Pyramid, however, in practice, this pyramid is very rarely used or followed. Most officers who currently sit at the rank of Lt Col and above will say that they have followed a different path and still managed to succeed, some even go as far as mentioning that they do not know what the key to their success was. It is with this thought process that the idea for restructuring the current Career Pyramid, into what has been labeled the “Career Castle,” came to be.

⁷ Sayce Falk & Sasha Rogers. *Junior Military Officer Retention: Challenges and Opportunities*. Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

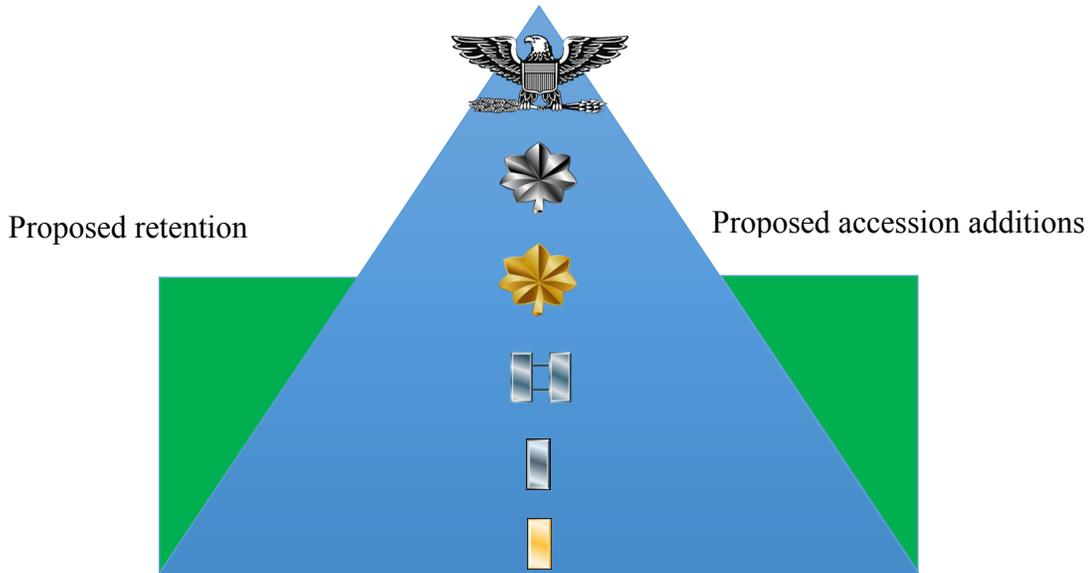


Figure 1

In the above figure, the traditional Career Pyramid is seen in the middle, depicted in blue, while the castle is represented by the wings in green on either side. Each green side represents untapped potential that the Air Force could capitalize on to create a more dynamic and diverse officer corps. The left side represents proposed retention additions, which would come from making the path to command optional and retaining those that choose not to take it. The right side represents proposed accession additions. This is the section where the Air Force could significantly branch out and increase the amount of officers we direct commission. This can be particularly cost efficient in difficult to retain and expensive to train career fields, such as Pilot, Cyber and Intel. In addition to directly accessing these individuals, the proposal suggests the raising of the maximum age of commissioning of pilots to 34, from the current age of 29. This will allow more pilots to flow over from the airlines, who may have a desire to serve but may not meet the current standards. Further, the green triangles close off at the rank of Major, where the nature of the castle begins to take shape. It is at this point in an officer's career that they would choose whether to remain in their current rank and responsibility level, or whether they desire to continue to pursue the rank of lieutenant colonel or greater. At this juncture, an officer would apply for promotion to lieutenant colonel, receive an endorsement from their commander, and then enter a pool of potential promotees.

By removing the "career broadening" assignments needed for promotion to advanced ranks, officers may focus on their primary field and maintain the satisfaction with their career

that they require. By removing the “up or out” requirements, or the requirement to continue promoting through the ranks, officers gain more control over their career and advancement and are generally happier with their jobs.

The concept of “up or out” was originally created as a means to ensure officers were continuing to develop and show continued growth, or else the system would eventually flush them out due to lack of promotion. And while this system has its merits, it also has serious downfalls in the way supervisors shape and develop young CGOs. Under the current system, supervisors push all young officers towards this common goal of Colonel, instead of taking the time to see where they would best serve the Air Force as well as themselves. Rather than focusing on how the individual can best serve the Air Force based on their needs and own desires for their career, the system places its emphasis on developing all officers to be future senior leaders. The Career Castle offers a dramatic change, giving officers a choice to remain at the rank of major, as a specialist in their field. Pilots, for instance, would be able to remain at the tactical level, flying most, if not all, of their 20-year career.

Additionally, in an effort to ensure a system of checks and balances remains, we suggest that a “do not retain” box be added to the Officer Performance Report (OPR). The addition of this box would require commanders to make the hard call when they have an individual who is no longer performing adequately and make a recommendation for them to be removed from service. Checking this box would drive a discharge board, and would have to be met with adequate documentation as to the individual’s performance, in order to avoid individual bias. These additions will provide future Air Force officers more opportunities for development and progression, and ultimately contribute to providing a more diverse officer corps.

This will restructure certain language found in the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980 relating to the “up or out” promotion and retention system once an officer has reached the grade of O-4 and the rank of Major. The system for officers prior to this career milestone will remain unchanged. According to the Chief of Staff, in the “30 Year Strategy,” “We must highlight the advantages of an agile force, with the attributes of flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness, in order to “move past the twentieth century’s industrial-era processes and paradigms and be ready for the globally connected, information-based world of the

coming decades.”⁹ DOPMA has existed since 1947 and is based on post-World War II personnel management reforms, however, and is a rigid system, in which more focus is placed on year of entry into service than individual ability.¹⁰ The Undersecretary of Defense, Brad Carson, highlights the unnecessary loss of talent as a tremendous opportunity cost of to the Department of Defense and the United States, due to arbitrary nature of career management.¹⁰

The current personnel system creates pressure on officers with a ticking promotion clock and current caps on officer end-strengths decreases flexibility in communities, which require a greater length of experience in increasingly complex technical fields.¹¹ Additionally, current officer promotion policies under DOPMA breed a command-centric promotion focus, leading to a denial of job opportunities due to standardized career paths as well as discouraging technical expertise among officers over the long term.¹² Also, the current unwieldy management of officer personnel decisions in massive batches creates significant officer excesses and shortages across a variety of career fields due to the need to manage large numbers based on the current accession and retention requirements. The current promotion system involves a summary review of officers grouped by year of entry into service with only the board guidance to determine whether the officer should be promoted compared against peers in relative age and time experience in service. There are few if any institution-wide metrics with which to measure the quality of talent across an entire workforce, leading to incredible difficulty in matching suitable officers for service in a specific duty position.¹³ Gen Welsh’s *USAF Strategic Human Capital Plan* (draft) outlines the need for a transparent promotion system versus the current method of stratifications and veiled promotion statements on performance reports.¹⁴

A better flow of communication between officers and their raters will create a better understand of where the officer stands and what is needed to advance to greater positions of

9. Welsh, “Call to the Future,” 7. 2014.

10. Carson, Brad. 2015. *Force of the Future. Reform Proposals*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense. Accessed October 17, 2015.

https://soc.blackboard.com/courses/1/AU019_SOS_TEMPLATE1/db/_5618489_1/%28OSD%29FotF%20Reform%20Proposals-For%20Service%20Coord-03AUG15.pdf]

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Office of the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force. (2014). *Draft Human Capital Plan*. Maxwell AFB.

authority or improve in their level of expertise. Currently, all officers are vectored for senior ranks and commensurate authority without consideration of individual desire. This is through a centralized, “one size fits almost all”, top-down approach which is believed by Tim Kane to drive out the best officers and reward mediocrity through a blindness to talent and aptitude.¹⁵ Kane continues to discuss the current system’s discouragement of specialization, ensuring officers are unable to remain in their desired specialty for an entire career, regardless of any associated training costs with such frequent turnover, pushing officers either up the ladder into positions for which they may not be a match or out of the service taking their training, expertise and significant sunk costs with them.¹⁶ The Air Force must be committed in its efforts to nurture and maintain a corps of professional officers as outstanding leaders of character, innovators, problem solvers, and committed proponents of airpower. We must capitalize on the abilities of each Air Force officer, ensuring in the current times of fiscal and operational constraints that each member is best and most efficient fit for each position, leveraging our tremendous talent as an agile force multiplier for the future.

DIRECT ACCESSION INITIATIVES

The third COA addresses changes in how officers in certain career fields are commissioned into the Air Force. The USAF Human Capital Plan, a September 2014 annex to the USAF Strategic Master Plan, states its first goal as “Win the competition for talent in both recruitment and retention.”¹⁷ The Air Force has to compete with its sister services, other governmental agencies, and corporate America for the talent that the Air Force needs to be the powerful force the nation needs in the future. It is imperative that we win this competition for the nation’s talent as the ever changing world becomes less and less about who has the fastest jets and biggest bombs and more about gaining and maintaining the advantage in other areas, such as space and cyberspace.

The Human Capital Plan goes so far to say that “we will not win that competition by ‘throwing money at the problem.’” The Air Force spends \$1.1 billion annually recruiting and training Airmen to do the mission, and spends millions more retaining the talent it trains. For example, the Air Force currently offers Aviator Retention Pay to pilots who reach the end of

15. Tim Kane. 2012. *Bleeding Talent*. Palgrave Macmillan.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Office of the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force. *Draft Human Capital Plan*, 9.

their active duty service commitment at the rate of \$225,000 over 10 years or \$125,000 over 5 years.¹⁸ While this is a significant bonus to the individual, the Air Force is the true winner, because it gets to retain the talent that it invested millions in to train. For example, a 2001 study showed that the Air Force spends over \$1 million training a pilot before they get to their primary airframe. It costs over \$2.5 million to train an F-15 pilot, and just under \$200,000 to train a KC-135 copilot.¹⁹ “Throwing money at the problem” has not completely solved the issue the Air Force has retaining its talent, since, as of March 2015, the Air Force was 520 pilots short of its manning requirements.²⁰ So what next?

The Air Force currently has a program called Commissioned Officer Training (COT), a five-week course at Maxwell AFB, designed to transition professionals in the medical, legal, and religious career fields from the civilian sector into service in the Air Force. The Air Force saves the millions of dollars that it would cost to train a surgeon, for example, by commissioning these individuals after they have already received their technical training. Graduates of this program earn a rank commensurate to their talents and training rather than commission as a second lieutenant. For example, a surgeon who wants to serve and already has all the skills and talents that the Air Force needs can go to COT and commission as a Major or Lieutenant Colonel. The Air Force saves on the cost of education required, a “M.D. or D.O. degree and completion of an ACGME- or AOA-accredited program of postgraduate specialty training.”²¹

The “30 Year Strategy” calls for an agile and inclusive Air Force, where agility is “the counterweight to the uncertainty of the future and its associated rapid rate of change.”²² The diverse and innovative thinking required to be this agile force does not have to be built from the ground up by the Air Force. There is untapped talent in the civilian sector that the Air Force needs to recruit in a multitude of career paths, as already practiced in medical, legal, and religious career fields.

For example, in order to be a pilot in the Air Force, one has to be a commissioned officer under the age of 29 and attend pilot training, a \$1 million training program, before flying a major

18. *United States Air Force Fiscal Year Budget Overview*. 2014, 1.

19. Rod Powers. "Air Force Aircrew Initial Training Costs." About.com US Military. September 1, 2001. Accessed October 18, 2015.

20. Brian Everstine. "Air Force Facing Increasing Shortage of Fighter Pilots." Air Force Times. March 20, 2015. Accessed October 18, 2015.

21 "Careers." Surgeon. Accessed October 18, 2015.

22 Welsh, “Call to the Future,” 9.

weapon system (MWS). The Air Force sees almost no difference between a former airline pilot with 3000 flight hours and someone without any flight time. It is logical to presume that an airline pilot who has probably already transitioned aircraft in his career could successfully transition into a crew airplane like a tanker or cargo aircraft. Anecdotally, pilots with a large amount of civilian flight time have never washed out of pilot training. The Air Force has already waived the requirement to attend Initial Flight Screening for pilots who already have a private pilot's license. The next logical step would be to waive undergraduate pilot training for pilots who have a certain number of hours or a certain license requirement. This would save millions of dollars and time in training.

This initiative to recruit directly into specialized AFSCs would extend specifically into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) career fields, as well as a few others. The ability to draw straight from the talent available in the civilian sector would reduce the need to recruit and train officers from scratch and save valuable time and resources required. Additionally, the Air Force will meet the charge of growing a more diverse officer corps. In a scenario where a commercial intelligence analyst desires to serve his or her country, he or she could bring their skills and talents as well as the latest business practices to the Air Force. A scientist or developmental engineer could do the same thing. By increasing the direct accession process to include mobility pilots, STEM career fields, and other various AFSCs, the Air Force can better compete to win the talent it needs.

Outside the of the obvious cost savings the Air Force could enjoy by direct commissioning experienced personnel into piloting and STEM career fields, there would be secondary benefits. Many of these employees, especially in the STEM fields, would likely have advanced certifications and experience with systems not used within the Air Force. This differentiation of experiences would lead to a diversity of thought from current Air Force personnel. In short, the Air Force would increase the perspectives from which problems are viewed and the number of solutions that may be recognized and enacted, creating a more effective and efficient workforce.

Of course, any major change within the Air Force personnel system comes with significant impacts. The medical, legal, and theological career fields have been able to facilitate direct commissions so easily, because they exist outside of the line officer career fields. Should career fields that have historically been filled and managed by line officers begin direct

commissioning, there may be concerns and inequalities in promotions timelines and opportunities for command. Specific guidelines would need to be created in order to ensure equality between personnel grown from within the force and those directly commissioned to an advanced rank. Should an Airman direct commissioned to the rank of lieutenant colonel get the opportunity for command before a lieutenant colonel (select) with fifteen years of experience in the Air Force? Specific guidance and criteria for command must be identified in these situations.

Furthermore, many STEM officers currently within the Air Force act as program managers, while civilian or contracted personnel perform much of the work. Should the Air Force directly commission officers into these STEM career fields, a paradigm shift must occur away from program management and toward technical expertise for these personnel. The Air Force may enjoy advanced expertise in these fields, but it should not hinder the advancement of direct commissioned personnel within the Air Force, simply because more traditional leadership does not understand that these individuals have been accessioned to fill a more technical role and not follow the outdated career model.

There will be issues to overcome and cultural aspects to change, it happens anytime a major personnel shift occurs. The benefits to increasing the career fields to which direct commissioning may occur, however, greatly outweigh those issues. The cost savings involved in training and the increases in diversity among the officer corps would directly support the innovation called for in the 30 Year Strategy and lead to a more effective and efficient officer corps.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING INITIATIVES

The fourth COA focuses on expanding the internship opportunities available to the officer corps. In the “30 Year Strategy,” Gen Welsh laid out his vision of a more agile Air Force, capable of retaining quality Airmen and innovative leaders. To accomplish this feat, “The Air Force must embrace the concept of life-long learning, which draws meaningful connections between the discrete educational experiences throughout a career.”²³ Reaching this end state will require change to an already fiscally constrained system, and a paradigm shift in how the United States Air Force culture views lifelong learning. Learning need not only occur for Airmen in the form of professional military education. This lifelong learning best manifests itself as learning

23. Ibid.

experiences outside the Air Force. It comes from internships with leading firms in industry. It comes from training and fellowships with our sister services and other intra-governmental agencies. It comes in the form of expanded opportunities for postgraduate education for junior leaders, spread out over their career.²⁴ Before one can appreciate the power of this lifelong learning course of action, one must evaluate the programs already available to junior officers in the United States Air Force.

Programs currently in place for internships with industry are not large enough to effectively bolster Air Force to industry relationships and develop Airman. The Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows Program currently exists to satisfy this goal.²⁵ This program provides 20 billets per year for Field Grade Officers across the entire Department of Defense, to intern with industry and learn best practices. These training opportunities are very limited, and not actively encouraged. The Office of the Secretary of Defense's report on the force of the future highlights that, "Where such programs do exist - such as the Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows program - there is little incentive for personnel to take advantage of the 20 billets available each year".²⁶ Cross service training opportunities also currently exist but are limited in scope.

For Company Grade Officers in the United States Air Force, Squadron Officer School is the only form of available professional military education. This five week course is mandatory for all Air Force captains with a mission to "educate, motivate, and mentor captains as current and future AF leaders."²⁷ The school is effective in teaching leadership techniques, team building, and problem solving in an air-minded setting. However, no time is allocated to integration with sister services and only an hour devoted to strategic partners and integration with intra-governmental agencies. There are no in-residence joint PME exchange programs at this rank, due to the variance in length across services. As a result, experience in the joint and intra-governmental agency for junior officers does not come until their first joint assignment.

24. Office of the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force. Draft Human Capital Plan, 20-37.

25. Carson. Force of the Future, 88.

26. Ibid.

27. (2015). Squadron Officer School Student Evaluations & Guidebook. Maxwell AFB: Squadron Officer College, 4.

Finally, the Air Force requires reform in the way it handles graduate education amongst its Company Grade Officer corps. Graduate degrees are not required until promotion to Colonel, but are highly encouraged for CGOs in any instances.²⁸ For those who choose to pursue graduate education, the extra workload can be challenging. “Military life is not conducive for servicemen to work on undergraduate and graduate education on their own time and expense.”²⁹ Tuition assistance programs are available through the education office, providing up to \$225 per credit hour. Even with this assistance, obtaining a postgraduate degree can be very time consuming and expensive. As a result, more officers are waiting until Air Command and Staff College to receive a military degree or using the Air Force Institute of Technology, instead of pursuing degrees at civilian institutions.³⁰ This trend lessens diversity of thought amongst junior air force officers and leaders.

In order to create more innovative leaders, with diversity of thought, the Air Force must reassess the way it educates its Company Grade Officer corps, specifically devoting resources to increasing internship with industry, joint and intra-governmental education, and postgraduate opportunities.

Why is it necessary to expand CGO education and training opportunities? The simple answer can be found on the Eagle and Fledglings statue on the terrazzo of the USAFA, “A man’s flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge”. A CGO is trained on their primary duty during his/her technical school. Then, they may receive short career field specific supplemental training in the years prior to Squadron Officer School (SOS). However, once graduating from SOS, most CGOs are not afforded other in-depth Air Force programed educational opportunities until Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE), during their years as a Major. This nine to twelve-year education gap (unless filled with individually driven graduate programs), is not conducive to developing a well-educated CGO corps. Moreover, this current structure does not meet the charge of “30 Year Strategy” to “embrace the concept of life-

28. Losey, S. (2014, November 17). Air Force Times. Retrieved from New education rules for Air Force officers begin Dec. 1: <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/benefits/education/2014/11/07/new-education-rules-for-air-force-officers-begin-dec-1/18637489/>, 1.

29. 25. Carson. Force of the Future, 98.

30. Ibid.

long learning”.³¹ In order to meet this charge, the USAF must refocus its education and training efforts by creating programs affording CGOs the opportunity to work with industry, universities, sister-services, and other intra-government agencies. Furthermore, these opportunities need to be available early in an officer’s career.

The first educational initiative, after refocusing the USAF’s training efforts, will be instituting a career field specific internship directly after a CGO’s first assignment. Allowing a lieutenant to work with industry for 6-12 months enables him or her to learn the industry standard for his or her respective career field. The Air Force is not always the first to create efficiency improving processes, nor is it always the first to innovate within career fields the DOD and civilian sector share. For this reason, allowing CGOs to spend an extended period within a successful company will arm that CGO with tools to bring back to the Air Force to ensure our processes and organizational constructs are as efficient as possible. For example, sending a cyber operations officer to work with Google after their first assignment can garner powerful career progression results. That CGO has been trained by the Air Force at Undergraduate Cyber Training (UCT), they then use that knowledge along with on the job training (OJT) at their first assignment to begin building the foundation for becoming a successful cyber operations officer. Now, this is where the internship comes in. The Air Force then sends this cyber operations officer to work with Google. This Airman will learn what makes Google successful, then bring that knowledge back to the Air Force to add value to our cyber operations mission. Moreover, while with Google, that Airman was acting as an Air Force ambassador, and created relationships that can lead to the successful recruitment and direct accession of quality civilian cyber specialist. This is a paradigm shift as compared to our current officer progression path, however, the positive results the USAF can gain from coupling Air Force technical school training with training from top tier companies will increase our CGOs ability to innovate, improve efficiencies, and become a well-rounded officer.

Next, Air Force leadership should consider instituting a post-SOS graduate intra-government fellowship program along with working with our sister-services to send a very small portion of our CGOs to sister service captain’s courses in lieu attending SOS. Initiating an intra-

31. Welsh, “Call to the Future,” 9.

government fellowship program early in a CGOs career allows them gain insight into how other agencies work and increase that CGOs intellectual agility improving their ability to make quality decisions. Sending one of our Logistics Readiness Officers to work with the Department of Transportation, or our Finance Officers to work with the Department of the Treasury exposes them to information, processes, and high-level decision making that will add value to that CGOs progression. These programs currently exist at the O-4 and above level. We want to make programs such as these available earlier, before they promote to Major, creating the framework for developing our officers earlier and increasing our CGOs ability to think critically and make high-level decision. Along with initiating these fellowship programs, sending a small portion of our CGOs to attend sister-service captain's courses in lieu of SOS will expose our Airman to the joint environment earlier in their career.

Along with working more closely industry and intra-governmental organizations, the USAF needs to build better relationships with colleges and universities allowing for the establishment of programs similar to the ones listed above. Steps to build those relationships have already begun. The National Security Agency (NSA) established a program to provide designators for institutions whose curriculum exemplifies academic excellence in certain areas of study.³² Of note, the NSA established the National Centers of Academic Excellence (CAE) in Cyber Operations Program and selected 13 academic institutions to earn the CAE in CO designation. Our efforts should not only be to identify such universities to tote that designator, we should send our officers to work with these universities. Creating partnerships such as these will optimize our ability to innovate and allow for more lifelong educational opportunities from which our CGOs can be developed.

Initiating programs such as these can seem daunting, however the USAF currently has established processes to vet and select candidates. We can select CGO internships, intra-governmental agency programs, sister-service PME, and university experiences the same way we select senior non-commissioned officers to attend sister-service joint PME. The governing body sends a call for nominations and issues eligibility criteria for each program. Candidates submit their package and are notified of selection. If a CGO is selected, he or she could potentially

32. National Security Agency, National Centers of Academic Excellence - Cyber Operations (9 September 2015): https://www.nsa.gov/academia/nat_cae_cyber_ops/index.shtml.

negatively affect their career progression (e.g. if a pilot is selected for a six month fellowship and leaves during their upgrade training). However, the added value of including these education and training experiences into a CGOs officer progression will positively impact not only that individual, but positively impact the USAF as a whole through the development of a well-rounded, more diverse, and well-educated officer corps.

Instituting educational experiences such as these will meet the Air Force 30 Year Strategy's goal as it relates to life-long learning. Moreover, the USAF will gain from such programs as industry standards are coupled with Air Force practices making-way for innovation and overall process improvement. As stated, the USAF is not always the first to create performance enhancing processes that increase overall organizational effectiveness. We would be naive to think we cannot learn from our industry partners, colleges and universities, sister-services, and intra-governmental organizations. Until more education and training opportunities are introduced at the CGO level, the Air Force will continue to bear mediocre officer progression results from not properly investing in the area of lifelong education.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this proposal, the Air Force's "30 Year Strategy" has been referenced a number of times. The service's leaders, the Secretary and the Chief of Staff, made the case that the officer corps must become more agile to remain relevant in the mid twenty-first century. The officer corps cannot grow until it stops bleeding talent and accepts that there is merit outside of the traditional schools of thought.

By redesigning the assignment system and restructuring the officer progression system, the strength of the force will grow and talented officers that might have gotten out under the current processes may choose to stay in longer and continue to provide their expertise. With an increased direct commissioning program and expanded training opportunities for officers in the future, the Air Force could see a more innovative officer corps, capable of solving diverse problem sets that the officers of today might be unable to manage.

In short, technology is rapidly changing the world and the methodologies of the past will no longer be able to support the Air Force officer corps in the manner that they have for so long. In order to look toward the future, the force must be open and willing to accept new ideas and

differing opinions. Diversity, bred through various forms of accessions into an attractive and innovative progression and development system, will be the only way for the officer corps to flourish in the future.

History will mark the early twenty-first century as either the period that the United States Air Force chose to remain stagnant and lost its competitive edge or became a fluid mechanism and remained the most technologically advanced fighting force that the world has ever seen.

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