Officer Career Management


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Summary

Section 572 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year (FY) 2018 (Pub. L. 115-91) required the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the secretaries of the military departments, to provide two reports to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on policies for regular and reserve officer career management. These reports pertained to prospective changes in the body of statutory provisions commonly referred to as the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) and the Reserve Officer Personnel Management Act (ROPMA). The first report covered promotion list sequencing, and the second addressed an additional 15 elements of review specified in the NDAA. The RAND Corporation’s National Defense Research Institute assisted in the preparation of those reports. The present report provides the material developed by the institute for the reports to the Armed Services Committees. The work was completed during calendar year 2018.

Methodology

The primary methods used in assembling this report were literature reviews and interviews with current policymakers—principals and other representatives from the service secretariats and military staffs responsible for officer management policy.1 RAND and similar research organizations have periodically assessed various aspects of DOPMA and ROPMA. We reviewed these assessments to identify key issues that would serve as a foundation for interviews with current policymakers in the military services.

We organized our service interviews, and this report, by grouping the 16 required reporting topics into five bins: promotions, tenure, talent management, active/reserve component permeability, and crosscutting issues. Many of the reporting topics could easily fit in more than one of these bins; we divided them in a way that we thought

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1 Due to the volume of reporting requirements, most interviews were conducted with action officers responsible for policy development, but they also included one deputy chief of staff, several deputy assistant secretaries, and other general officers or senior executive service members. The organizational level of interviewees varied by military department, at the department’s discretion.
would facilitate interviewing service representatives and analyzing their responses. The topic areas are shown in Appendix A.

Promotions

The reporting topics relating primarily to promotions are

- evaluation of the impact on officer retention of granting promotion boards the authority to recommend officers of particular merit be placed at the top of the promotion list
- an analysis of the reasons and frequency with which officers in the grade of O-3 or above are passed over for promotion to the next-highest grade, particularly those officers who have pursued advanced degrees, broadening assignments, and nontraditional career paths
- an analysis of the utility and feasibility of creating new competitive categories or an independent career and promotion path for officers in low-density military occupational specialties
- an analysis of how the armed forces can avoid an officer corps disproportionately weighted toward officers serving in the grades of major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel and Navy grades of lieutenant commander, commander, and captain, if statutory officer grade caps are relaxed.

What We Found

While there is some room for added flexibility in the promotion system, service representatives indicated that, by and large, DOPMA/ROPMA promotion structures still work well. While the service representatives were supportive of additional legislative flexibilities to manage their promotion processes, they were very cautious about implementation for fear of creating stagnation in a closed promotion system that they believe currently flows well.

The military services widely support legislative reform to provide service secretaries with the authority to sequence all or part of their promotion lists on the basis of merit. But the services also want to exercise their own discretion regarding how they use this authority.

The service representatives did identify the need for some minor adjustments to accommodate the recruitment and retention of two types of officers in particular. First, they agreed that it was reasonable to amend DOPMA/ROPMA to accommodate officers who gain additional education or career-broadening experience that would increase their value to the force. One option would be to allow those officers to opt
Second, the service representatives widely agreed that there was a need to better accommodate officers in emerging mission areas, such as cyber operations specialists. In light of this concern, they supported options to develop technical tracks that provide alternatives to traditional promotion patterns and to offer constructive credit for advanced education or experience gained before commissioning. However, some service representatives recognized that constructive credit will have limited appeal in attracting highly experienced accessions because it is not used in basic pay determinations (10 U.S.C. 533). In all cases, however, the service representatives emphasized the need for service secretary discretion to implement these flexibilities in a controlled and judicious manner.

Tenure

The reporting topics relating primarily to tenure are

- a statistical analysis based on exit surveys and other data available to the military departments on the impact that current personnel policies under DOPMA have on recruiting and retention of qualified regular and reserve officers of the armed forces; specifically, the statistical analysis shall include an estimate of the number of officers who leave the armed forces each year because of dissatisfaction with the current personnel policies, including career progression, promotion policies, and a perceived lack of opportunity for schooling and broadening assignments
- an analysis of the benefits and limitations of the current promotion time lines and the “up-or-out” system required by policy and law
- an analysis of the utility and feasibility of encouraging officers to pursue careers of lengths that vary from the traditional 20-year military career and the mechanisms that could be employed to encourage officers to pursue these varying career lengths
- an analysis of the current officer force–shaping authorities and any changes needed to these authorities to improve recruiting, retention, and readiness

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2 That option is now available to service secretaries based on Section 501 of the FY 2019 NDAA.

3 The opt-out and alternative promotion authority provisions contained in the FY 2019 NDAA provide means for developing promotion policies suitable for a technical track. The FY 2019 NDAA also included an amendment to DOPMA/ROPMA that would allow for the services to award more constructive credit. See Sections 502, 505, and 507 of the FY 2019 NDAA, discussed in Chapter Seven.
• an analysis of any other matters the Secretary of Defense considers appropriate to improve the effective recruitment and retention of officers.

What We Found
Consistent with our findings on other topics, the service representatives agreed that, with respect to tenure management, DOPMA/ROPMA provides a solid foundation for officer career management. While the service representatives were open to increased flexibility, they maintained that the fundamental nature of the statutory up-or-out system is effective.

Where the services are pursuing tenure flexibilities, two themes emerge. First, while increased flexibilities are desirable, the service representatives still prefer a high threshold for executing any new authority or flexibility: approval at the service secretary level. Second, representatives from each of the services articulated that flexibilities should be exercised based on the needs of the service and must be tied to requirements. While the increase in tenure flexibilities may provide retention incentives and increase individuals’ career satisfaction, the goal of the flexibilities is to meet the needs of the service—not simply to meet individual desires.

The service representatives maintained that DOPMA was initially created as the solution to a problem: promotion stagnation for junior officers. As such, the services are cognizant that any reforms or efforts to modernize DOPMA must not invalidate the gains DOPMA has brought to officer personnel management since 1980.

Talent Management
The reporting topics relating primarily to talent management are

• an analysis of the extent to which current personnel policies inhibit the professional development of officers
• an analysis of the efficacy of officer talent management systems currently used by the military departments
• an analysis of how best to encourage and facilitate the recruitment and retention of officers with technical expertise.

What We Found
The services have devised standardized career paths that effectively develop tactically proficient leaders.4 Those career paths account for facets of DOPMA and ROPMA

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4 We use the term tactical in this context as relating to the immediate employment of military forces, particularly at a smaller unit level, as opposed to strategic, which relates to long-term or broader organizational or operational considerations.
that constrain professional development models, such as cohort management and the up-or-out system. Standardized career progression may place a burden on career fields that require additional training. Relaxing those constraints can change professional development models as currently employed, such as by allowing additional time for training-intensive career fields.

While there is general satisfaction with most of DOPMA’s and ROPMA’s professional development implications, changes to DOPMA and ROPMA could change the relationship between the development of tactical expertise and the development of strategic expertise. There is some indication that tactical expertise crowds out the development of strategic expertise, especially early in a military career. As Army representatives mentioned, changes to a promotion board’s culture could change professional development models.

The services have wide latitude in talent management, and that latitude manifests in alternative approaches to the definition of talent. While the concept of talent evolves in some circumstances, the services rely on requirements to drive talent management. To some extent, broadening is a career luxury, as operational requirements are prioritized ahead of broadening.

Technical expertise applies to an ever-changing compendium of skills, but insights gained from a current focus on acquisition and retention of cyber expertise can apply to other emerging areas. The services representatives see changes to constructive credit as an important recruitment tool.

**Active/Reserve Component Permeability**

One topic pertained to active/reserve component permeability: the utility and feasibility of allowing officers to transition between active duty and reserve active status repeatedly and seamlessly throughout the course of their military careers.

**What We Found**

The service representatives we spoke with agree that there are benefits to permeability—including the potential to recruit and retain individuals who are seeking more flexible career paths. However, representatives from the services also identified several barriers to permeability, including cultural, legal, and policy barriers. The current scrolling process is one of the biggest barriers. In considering options for improving it, there seems to be support for appointment to a service instead of a component, avoiding the delays incurred in rescrolling an officer moving from one component to another within the same service. There is also support for merging the active-duty list and reserve active-status list, as long as the services retain flexibility to use competitive categories to consider regular and reserve officers for promotion separately.
Crosscutting Topics

Three topics applied broadly across all of the bins:

• an analysis of what actions have been or could be taken within current statutory authority to address officer management challenges
• an analysis of what actions can be taken by the armed forces to change the institutional culture regarding commonly held perceptions on appropriate promotion time lines, career progression, and traditional career paths
• an analysis of the impact that increased flexibility in promotion, assignments, and career length would have on officer competency in their military occupational specialties.

What We Found

The services currently use multiple competitive categories, selective continuation, and personalized talent management systems to greater or lesser degrees. Services less invested in these approaches are considering increasing usage of them.

Service cultures have thoroughly internalized the regularity of DOPMA/ROPMA promotion structures and the selectivity shaped by grade ceilings, up-or-out provisions, and grade-specific tenure limits. Management of core warfighting occupations and many support occupations is so well calibrated to these structures that service representatives have difficulty contemplating alternatives to them. While the inflexibility of the system has its critics, service leadership and individual officers have varying degrees of discomfort in moving away from it. Where substantive career management changes are contemplated, they are generally to address niche issues in highly technical functions or those that require extensive education or experience out of mainstream service functions. Changes to this culture are likely to evolve slowly as the services gain experience with new flexibilities in the niches where they are introduced.


The 2019 NDAA contained several statutory changes that are closely related to many of the exploratory reporting requirements contained in the 2018 NDAA. These changes

• remove a previous age restriction at time of commissioning
• allow for additional constructive service credit at commissioning
• standardize temporary promotion authority across military departments
• allow resequencing of promotion lists based on merit
• allow officers to opt out of promotion consideration under some circumstances
• allow selective consideration of more junior officers
• provide an alternative promotion framework for officers in designated competitive categories.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We reached several broad conclusions:

• The military departments believe that DOPMA and ROPMA continue to provide an effective overall framework for managing the careers of officers in core warfighting communities.
• Where change is needed, it is primarily to accommodate needs in low-density occupations, to foster the pursuit of unconventional but useful career paths, or to permit an earlier shift of more promising officers from tactical to strategic skill development.
• The services are more open now to new flexibilities in officer career management than they were when Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter’s Force of the Future proposals were first unveiled.
• The one phenomenon that signals a need for new flexibilities more than any other is the employment of military personnel in offensive cyber warfare. There is a perception, not yet fully in focus, that conventional career management approaches may not yield the human capital needed for success in this mission set.

Openness of service representatives to new officer career management flexibilities is married to a strong sense that implementation should be at the discretion of service secretaries. We sense a growing willingness to differentiate career and talent management approaches across the services and for different needs within each of the services, but with secretarial discretion that allows the services to tailor their approaches to specific needs and to allow gradual adoption of new flexibilities as their longer-range consequences become better understood.

Our recommendation to the services is to search for innovative ways to take advantage of existing and emerging flexibilities. Our recommendation to legislators is to provide service secretaries with the latitude to adapt innovatively to their current and future challenges.