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# Enhancing Lateral Entry Initiatives in the U.S. Air Force to Increase Uniformed Senior Leader Diversity and Overall Innovation

**A**s detailed in the *Department of Defense Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan*, despite the recent rise in first-time selections of candidates from racial/ethnic and gender minority groups for unprecedented career opportunities across the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), work is still required to increase the diversity of the uniformed senior leadership (Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, 2020).<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Air Force has led the way in this effort with its selection of the first-ever Black service chief and should continue to make its cadre of senior leaders more representative of the populations that it leads and serves.

Correspondingly, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) and its sister services have analyzed and reported a need to attract and retain innovative people—regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender—to maintain their technological advantage

## Abbreviations

DAF	Department of the Air Force
DEI	diversity, equity, and inclusion
DEIA	diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
FY	fiscal year
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

against global adversaries.<sup>2</sup> Initiatives to attract and retain innovative personnel, however, have been focused on junior service members, which do not address the immediate need for innovative leaders. While these initiatives will hopefully bear fruit in the long run, they do not account for the lag time it takes to grow a technically proficient leader. Experience is not something that can be rushed.

The intersection of diversity and innovation provides an opportunity for simultaneously addressing major human capital priorities within the DAF:

Valuing diversity is not simply the right thing to do. Leveraging diversity ensures we maintain the competitive advantage—an adaptable, innovative Total Force capable of meeting current and future operational demands. (DoD, 2012, p. 4)

Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr., characterized the design of a strategic vision for DoD that addresses the need for a talented and innovative force as a national security imperative and further stresses the need for programmatic links

to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA)—through the DoD DEIA Strategic Plan (DoD, 2022).

In addition, when comparing initiatives across the services, the DAF appears to be lagging behind other armed services on efforts to use lateral entry programs. In 2021, the U.S. Marine Corps released its *Talent Management 2030* plan, which outlines its intentions to implement lateral entry for specialized positions (U.S. Marine Corps, 2021). The U.S. Coast Guard has also recently created a Lateral Entry Beta Test initiative to support its recruitment efforts for key positions (Shapiro, 2022).

Previous and existing lateral entry initiatives have had varying degrees of success and provide evidence for how the DAF and the other military services should proceed in the current human capital management environment. The most pervasive conditions driving the need for lateral entry stem from the following: (1) the skill sets required for current and future threat reduction depend on access to a broader range of talent; (2) if organizations do not grow sufficiently diverse leaders to cultivate innovation from within, they must import them from the external market; and (3) tolerance has diminished within the U.S. government, the military, and society overall for the senior ranks not being representative of the populations that they lead and serve.<sup>3</sup>

Laterally entering the innovative talent that is needed for current and future operational advantages against U.S. adversaries provides opportunities to

- take advantage of the many individuals with historically marginalized racial and gender identities that possess requisite innovative and/or technological skill sets

- mitigate the national security threats associated with sustaining a high rate of underrepresentation in both leadership positions and highly technical career fields
- offset persistent underrepresentation of historically marginalized racial and gender groups in leadership positions and technical career fields that are unlikely to be overcome in the short to medium term because of gaps in the pipeline.

This publication will provide conceptual design considerations—both positive and negative—for more aggressively implementing lateral entry initiatives within the DAF, but many of the concepts, barriers, and strategies discussed have broader applicability to the other armed services in DoD. If properly designed, lateral entry initiatives can use the intersectionality of innovation and diversity to increase both within the mid- to senior-level uniformed ranks. In the next section, we define and describe lateral entry while providing a regulatory context for such initiatives. We then discuss the need for lateral entry programs for mid- to senior-level leaders through the lenses of diversity and innovation. Finally, we discuss barriers to implementation before summarizing the main considerations for increasing lateral entry initiatives.

## **A Closer Look at Lateral Entry in DoD and the DAF**

We first must define lateral entry in the U.S. military context. This context is formed by the regulatory environment in which lateral entry initiatives exist and the successes and failures of current and past initiatives. As we discuss

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later, lateral entry initiatives must come with a disclaimer that they are not panaceas for technology or demographic shortfalls because of the potential difficulties of hiring someone from outside the military—regardless of how qualified—as a uniformed senior leader.

### **Lateral Entry Defined and Described**

*Lateral entry* implies transplanting mid- to senior-level professionals with specific, targeted skill sets or attributes from outside an organization to fill gaps within an organization. For the military, lateral entry is a unique way of tapping into available civilian labor markets (Tyson and Horowitz, 1992). Laterally entering capabilities from industry into the services' senior ranks may be targeted at infusing skills and innovative capabilities, but it could also be

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Traditional recruitment and selection processes focus on potential rather than on experience (i.e., already acquired skills), and many traditional military incentives are unlikely to be applicable for lateral entry personnel.

applied as a parallel pathway to increasing diversity in the senior ranks.

In the academic literature, lateral entry is typically discussed as a tool for organizations with exclusive or near-exclusive internal pipelines (i.e., professions that traditionally recruit at the entry level and then promote from within), in which entry at middle to senior levels from similar or even equivalent organizations can be difficult. These professions include law enforcement officers and teachers, among others. The retention and performance of lateral entrants is a concern among these professions (Brown et al., 2006), but lateral entry programs, where implemented, can offer the opportunity to spur innovation and plug gaps caused by attrition.

The programmatic scope of an imagined lateral entry program, which we discuss later in this publication, should consider a holistic, officer career pipeline approach to improve the proportion of minorities in both mid-level and senior leadership—defined here as O-5 and above—which will increase innovation in the service(s)—both from laterally entering technological capability and the added advantages in innovation that diversity provides.<sup>4</sup>

### **Regulatory Sufficiency to Support Expanded Lateral Entry Initiatives**

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 provided the services with the ability to commission lateral entries, specifically for cyber career fields (Pub. L. 114-328, 2016). The FY 2019 NDAA further provided new authorities to enable the services to access, retain, and promote competitive officers, including the authority to commission industry professionals at a rank commensurate with their experience to access critical skill sets (Pub. L. 115-232, 2018).

As a consequence of the FY 2017 and FY 2019 NDAAs, the branches of the armed services have put forth varying levels of effort toward lateral entry initiatives. For example, the Air Force has reported that, although the DAF is a “little bit behind,” it is trying to use lateral entry for field grade officers and up to increase the senior-level cyber workforce (U.S. House of Representatives, 2022, p. 17). Meanwhile, the U.S. Army has operationalized its talent management initiative to recruit lateral entrants for high-need positions in multiple fields for both its reserve and active components (U.S. Army Talent Management, undated).

## Current Lateral Entry Practices Offer Opportunities for Growth

Lateral entry is not new to the military; examples provide a structure to quickly infuse expertise into DoD at varying levels. One well-known example is the military medical community's leveraging of civilian-trained medical professionals and their expertise. Previous programs have also enabled DoD to on-ramp officers who have previously served (i.e., with *prior service*) (Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, 2020). Regarding conditions for using lateral entry, past RAND Corporation research suggests that programs targeting entrants with advanced training would help overcome real and perceived programmatic hurdles and that optimal candidates should have relatively "advanced levels of training and experience" (Levy et al., 2004, p. xiv).

While the military has a unique mission set, the civilian employment model can be used as a baseline template. In the civilian model, employers recruit much of their mid-level and senior-level personnel from other organizations and even, at times, other professions. Accordingly, they invest in the recruiting and selection process to identify the appropriate talent. Most civilian organizations also must focus on remaining an employer of choice because they lack the stability that long-term military contracts provide.

To adapt this civilian model to fit the military's needs, DoD must understand the type of talent they want and how to attract it. This analysis will probably differ from the military's traditional recruiting and selection processes that focus on young, entry-level personnel. Traditional recruitment and selection processes focus on potential rather

than on experience (i.e., already acquired skills), and many traditional military incentives are unlikely to be applicable for lateral entry personnel. For example, \$50,000 is a lot of money for an unskilled worker who is new to the labor force, but many personnel with the skills that DoD is targeting (i.e., those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] fields) have substantial salaries that render a \$50,000 signing bonus unconvincing. DoD needs to consider how to furnish alternative incentives within its current compensation system to offset pay gaps between military salaries and private-sector salaries. In addition to these financial matters, DoD will need to address cultural barriers, which we discuss in more detail below.

## A Closer Look at the Need for Lateral Entry

There are several factors driving the need for lateral entry. First, the speed at which technology grows and changes and the ways modern workers develop and use their skill sets necessitate a different talent acquisition process for STEM fields in the U.S. military. Second, the increasing threat posed by a lack of diverse leadership has advanced a national security imperative for diversity-based lateral entry efforts (Butler et al., 2023). Third, the military has not succeeded in attracting enough talent in many technical career fields overall, nor facilitated the development and retainment of highly skilled service members.

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### **The Rate of Technological Change and the Modern Worker**

New technologies can emerge and become obsolete within years in the modern workforce. Accordingly, workers constantly adapt and grow their skills to meet changing needs. They also shift jobs frequently. As of 2022, workers spent, on average, 4.1 years with one employer (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The U.S. military has an extensive training apparatus that helps its personnel continuously develop skills, but that apparatus is not agile and struggles to adapt to meet emerging requirements. A similar problem arises in the military procurement process, but in addition to bureaucratic hurdles, the “products” of talent management (the employees) get to decide whether they want to continue to work for the military.

Given the increasing focus on advanced technologies to retain competitive advantage, these challenges become

strategic obstacles to national security. The advantages of using advanced technologies are degraded without qualified operators—and more importantly, those with the requisite experience to lead people and functions using these technologies. As military investment in technology increases, the DAF and DoD must make parallel investments in personnel to both conduct and lead operations. And in some areas, such as artificial intelligence (AI), where algorithms need to be constantly adapted, investments in personnel and technology carry equal importance. Specific leader tasks might include prioritizing investments in the development and acquisition of technology, using insights from advanced technology to properly deploy forces in a cyberwar, or using knowledge of AI to impart trust in the development and execution of tactics in air warfare.

The need for qualified personnel is especially urgent given that *gray-zone conflicts*—where there is a great deal of ambiguity—are becoming more frequent and are dominated by technology. This ambiguity can further drive the need to agilely adapt. Thus, this need is a critical issue to address when thinking about long-term competition with near-peer adversaries, such as China.

In a rapidly changing world and workforce, any organization that purely relies on homegrown talent faces the risk of critical talent-mission mismatches. Although arguments have been made that highly technical roles can be filled by civilians, military personnel with specialized technical skill sets are needed for three key reasons. First, only military personnel are subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The UCMJ provides special authorities to maintain discipline in times of war or emergency and allows critical talent to be retained in the event

of an emergency (10 U.S.C., Chapter 47). As mentioned, service obligations, transitioning laterally entered service members, and benefits will all need to be determined as part of an implementation strategy; implementing a lateral entry program will allow for career civilian experts at varying income levels to pursue their patriotic desire to serve as uniformed personnel.

Secondly and correspondingly, the military services also need technically proficient leaders. Civilians (almost exclusively) fall outside the military command and control structure and cannot give orders with the same legal force as that of military leaders. Bringing in mid-grade technical talent could create a pool of expertise to fill this technical leadership gap.

Finally, some decisions and responsibilities are designated as prerogatives of the military. Contractors are not directly employed by the government and should not be authorized to make decisions about extremely costly and sensitive equipment, such as a fighter jet. Uniformed technical talent is needed to manage these expensive, highly technical, and government-owned systems.

## **Threat Associated with the Lack of Diverse Senior Leadership**

Paralleling the threat from a lack of technically skilled talent throughout the leadership ranks is the threat from a lack of diversity in senior leadership. Just as the lack of technical expertise can limit the capability of the military to deploy advanced technology, a lack of diversity in senior leadership can limit the military's ability to field creative solutions and develop innovative technology and processes (Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclu-

sion, 2020). The lack of diversity among senior leadership also makes it more difficult to recruit women and racial/ethnic minorities—individuals from these populations are less likely to join if they do not have role models and mentors that look like them. Because the services are facing a shrinking pool of eligible recruits, it is essential to expand recruitment as much as possible among all populations (Serbu, 2022).

DoD has declared diversity to be a strategic imperative, particularly noting the connection between diversity and innovation within organizations (DoD, 2022). In fact, diversity has been a high priority for over a decade and was mentioned in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan and reports from the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, 2020).

As the United States shifts its focus to China and the Indo-Pacific region, DoD must expand the variety of skills and backgrounds of its talent. This strategic shift toward great-power competition echoes the changes that DoD was forced to make following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in response to which its focus shifted to the Middle East and counterterrorism operations. During that period, the need for employees with relevant cultural backgrounds and language skills grew fast. A similar impetus drives calls for diversity and innovation as the DoD's focus continues to shift to the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, several studies have claimed that more-diverse organizations perform better than their competitors because of improved morale and an increased ability to innovate when faced with challenges. Diversity—particularly racial/ethnic and gender diversity—represents a strategic advantage in both innovation and



problem-solving (Kamarck, 2019; Esposito and Gregory, 2021; Helvey and Sheetz, 2021), and expanding the pool of candidates means the DoD will be able to fill gaps across all areas.

Indeed, the private sector can be a useful source for diversity. Tracing career trajectory from degree attainment through career statistics by race and ethnicity,

military-eligible minorities exist in the pipeline. For example, the table below presents 2020–2021 data from the National Center for Education Statistics revealing that the different minority groups are producing degree holders with bachelor’s degrees up through the doctoral level. Based on the need for commissioned officers to have bachelor’s degrees, this is promising evidence of

Percentage of Degrees Conferred, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex of Student, 2020–2021

Level of Degree and Sex	Total	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	White	Two or More Races
Associate's degree	1,014,492	0.8	6.7	12.2	26.2	50.2	3.9
Male	373,627	0.7	7.6	10.2	24.6	52.9	3.9
Female	640,865	0.9	6.2	13.4	27.2	48.5	3.8
Bachelor's degree	1,963,737	0.5	8.6	10.5	16.5	59.7	4.1
Male	806,554	0.4	9.4	8.9	15.3	61.9	4.1
Female	1,157,183	0.5	8.1	11.6	17.4	58.2	4.2
Master's degree	737,363	0.5	7.9	13.3	12.7	62.4	3.1
Male	260,307	0.4	9.3	11.2	12.0	64.0	3.1
Female	477,056	0.6	7.2	14.5	13.0	61.6	3.2
Doctoral degree <sup>a</sup>	170,580	0.4	13.2	10.0	9.7	63.4	3.4
Male	71,253	0.4	13.2	7.7	9.3	66.1	3.2
Female	99,327	0.4	13.2	11.6	9.9	61.4	3.5

SOURCE: Adapted from National Center for Education Statistics, undated.

NOTE: Data in this table represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data are for postsecondary institutions participating in Title IV federal financial aid programs. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Reported racial/ethnic distributions of students by level of degree, field of study and sex were used to estimate race/ethnicity for students whose race/ethnicity was not reported. Detail may not sum to total because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup> Includes Ph.D., Ed.D., and comparable degrees at the doctoral level, as well as such degrees as M.D., D.D.S., and law degrees that were classified as first-professional degrees prior to 2010–2011.



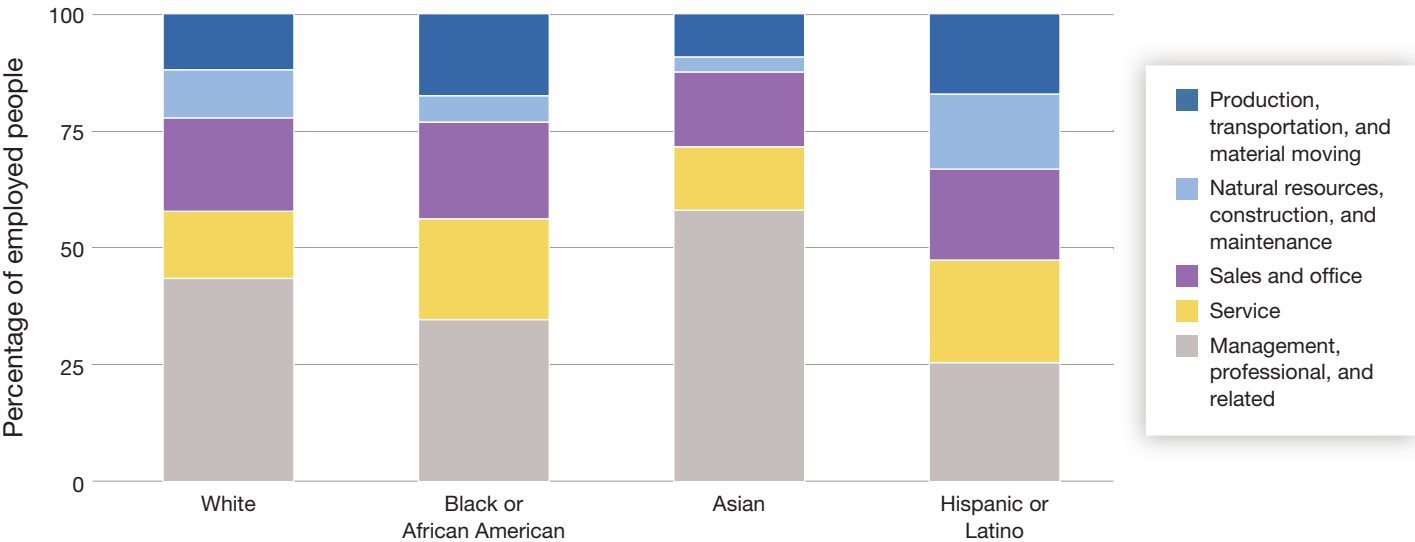
the broader market for people not already serving in the military. The potential market is especially promising for minorities with advanced or more-technical degrees or career fields. For example, 10.0 percent and 9.7 percent of the 170,580 doctoral degrees conferred were earned by Black and Hispanic students, respectively, and 13.2 percent were awarded to Asian/Pacific Islander students.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), “[i]n 2020, 58 percent of employed Asians worked in management, professional, and related occupations—the highest paying major occupational category—compared with 43 percent of employed Whites, 35 percent of employed

Blacks, and 26 percent of employed Hispanics.” Racial/ethnic minorities in the management, professional, and related occupations category represent candidates with the potential to bolster diversity and innovation in the military. The figure below, based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Population Survey, depicts the annual averages of employed people by race/ethnicity and occupation in 2020.

A report on diversity in the tech sector from the Center for Employment Equity corroborates these data, indicating that White women and Asian men have made the greatest gains in securing executive positions in the tech field and

Annual Averages of Employed People, by Race/Ethnicity and Occupation, in 2020



SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, Chart 3.

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that Asian men and women are being hired or promoted into technical and managerial jobs (Han and Tomaskovic-Devey, undated). Alarming, some tech firms are trending toward homogeneity—a majority of their staff are White men. Furthermore, diversity efforts in this sector range from tokenism to true integration with accordingly varied outcomes (i.e., organizations that “walk the walk” with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] tend to outperform their merely performative competitors) (Hill et al., 2023).

With tech managerial and executive positions seemingly unattainable for so many other racial/ethnic minorities, it stands to reason that there is a pool of underutilized and underemployed talent that may find an opportunity to lead and be recognized as valuable and attractive candidates for military service. In addition to the high level of racial/ethnic minority underutilization and underemployment, there is the volatility of tech sector employment (Govindarajan and Srivastava, 2022) and the inflation-driven high cost of living throughout the United States (Wilde, 2022). In contrast, the job stability, access to housing and health care, and potential for upward mobility

while serving as a military officer could be effective incentives for those who have historically been sidelined within private-sector tech firms.

## The Importance of Attracting, Retaining, and Growing Innovation

The DoD’s *Personnel and Readiness Strategy for 2030* calls out the need to develop a force that is technology dominant and strategically ready to sustain itself globally, stating that “[t]here is no substitute for the timely recognition and exploitation of new ideas, new technologies, and new approaches to securing our national defense” (DoD, 2020, p. 3). The strategy also notes that the DoD’s workforce requirements will increasingly face competition from the private sector, which shifts power from employers to employees.

Additionally, generational shifts are decreasing the number of eligible candidates for service because of increased rates of obesity, drug usage, and other mental and physical health disqualifiers. In 2020, for example, only 29 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds were eligible for military service (DoD, 2020). And while some people from historically disadvantaged groups suffer increased ineligibility for military service (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2009), those traditionally classified as racial/ethnic minorities are also becoming an increasingly larger percentage of the U.S. population—representing a growing proportion of the pool of eligible candidates and an increased potential to expand diversity at all levels of the uniformed service.

As noted above, studies also indicate that cultural diversity improves the performance of teams because it fosters a creative tension that, if properly managed, improves

innovation outcomes. Also, cultural diversity increases the opportunity to formulate unique solutions to problems because people from different cultures may see things from a different perspective and bring fresh and innovative vantage points to the table (Jones, Chace, and Wright, 2020). These advantages are seen as critical components of the United States' long-term national security strategy to remain competitive against its near-peer competitors.

Accordingly, as we transition to a discussion on barriers to implementing lateral entry programs, it is important to consider the incentive structures that attract employees of diverse backgrounds and with diverse skill sets. The U.S. military already faces the challenge that top technologists earn significantly more working in the private sector and have more freedom in their lifestyle choices and where they live (Schneider, 2018). Despite NDAA language and DoD focus, the DAF and the other services are struggling to advance initiatives to attract both more highly skilled technology workers, as well as those from diverse backgrounds and with diverse identities. In addition to the challenges related to incentive structures and lifestyle considerations, other challenges to lateral entry initiatives—whether to attract talent at the entry level or at the middle to senior levels—include pipeline myths, cultural barriers, and obstructionism.

## **Barriers to Implementing Lateral Entry Initiatives**

As a first step to implementing successful lateral entry initiatives, several barriers must be overcome. Such barriers require addressing the pipeline myth that qualified candidates are lacking at all levels; overcoming cultural barriers;

and addressing those who intentionally or unintentionally obstruct lateral entry for various reasons, which might include resistance to bringing an outsider with no military background in to lead a military unit. It is important to keep in mind that there are several conceptual and logistical aspects of developing a robust lateral entry program that will also come into play as it is further developed and refined. For example, diversifying recruitment sources and recruitment practices will be needed to broadcast lateral entry initiatives and attract people of different ages, races, and ethnicities.

## **Leaky Pipeline Myth**

Often the problems with representation at the top levels of an organization are attributed to the “leaky pipeline” (Garbee, 2017). In this analogy, diverse, qualified candidates for senior leadership positions are hard to find

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because, at each career stage, candidates leak out. Representation problems are said to be inevitable because no one office or directorate owns the entire pipeline, and an organization cannot control how and when qualified candidates, including those with more-diverse backgrounds and identities, leak out. This analogy is problematic because it presupposes that the only reasons service members leak out of the pipeline is because either they do not want to advance for personal reasons or that they were underperformers who were not selected for advancement based on a lack of merit.

A better-suited analogy for the lack of diversity in leadership roles is a broken ladder. For some, the career ladder is straightforward, and a lucky few have help to skip a few rungs. For women and racial/ethnic minorities, such straightforward progress tends not to be the case; in fact, they do not seem to be given the same ladders as other service members. At various points on their ladders, there are broken rungs. For many, these breaks represent obstacles

that can be overcome at the junior level, but as women and racial/ethnic minorities climb higher up on the ladder, the number of broken rungs increases and overcoming these obstacles becomes more difficult. Rather than complaining about leaks in a pipeline that appear to be out of an organization's control, an organization can seek to systematically find where personnel are getting stuck on the career ladder and either find ways to fix those rungs or create an entirely new ladder to help them continue to climb.

### History of the Leaky Pipeline Myth

The origin of the leaky pipeline myth was a 1989 study from the National Science Foundation that claimed the United States would have a shortage of more than 600,000 STEM Ph.D.s by 2006. The myth became a critical part of the report *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of

Engineering, and Institute of Medicine, 2007). This report motivated both the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and the America COMPETES Act of 2022. Together, these Acts created a preschool-to-Ph.D. pipeline narrative in which qualified candidates slowly dropped out at different points in their education, ranging from preschool to graduate programs. As a byproduct of this urgency to increase the number of STEM Ph.D.s, women and racial/ethnic minorities became a focus of DoD recruitment efforts for the first time, not because of the now widely recognized importance of diversity for innovation but merely as a result of a concern for pushing more people—whatever their identities and backgrounds might be—through the pipeline.

Studies from various institutions, including RAND, subsequently went on to disqualify the leaky pipeline assertion and determined there was no evidence that a STEM Ph.D. shortage was a problem (Butz et al., 2003; Garbee, 2017). Indeed, many analysts now suggest there are too many Ph.D.s in the U.S. job market, including in STEM fields, which creates job shortages in traditional fields that Ph.D.s work in. For example, in 2015, there were 68,000 biomedical postdocs in the United States, which led to an oversaturated job market that could not absorb all these qualified employees (Iasevoli, 2015). The leaky pipeline analogy is still perpetuated across an array of professions, however, and particularly within the tech industry where it began. Perhaps most damagingly, it has been adapted as an explanation for why companies and specific fields do not have diverse personnel, particularly at higher levels of leadership, regardless of the profession. As a barrier for lateral entry programs, this leaky pipeline myth can lead to a belief that there are simply not enough diverse, technically qualified mid- to senior-level candidates, regardless of the

organization, because they are assumed to have leaked out of the overall STEM career pipeline over time.

### Contrary Evidence to the Leaky Pipeline Myth

The leaky pipeline myth has been disproven as an explanation for a lack of workforce diversity in multiple ways, both within academia and the private sector. For example, a 2014 analysis published in *USA Today* found that there were two times as many Black and Latino graduates in computer science and engineering than private companies hired, indicating that diverse candidates are not even entering the metaphorical pipeline in many cases. The authors explained that several of the tech companies that were approached, including Facebook, Twitter, Google, Apple, and Yahoo, chose not to comment about the discrepancy between graduation rates for these racial/ethnic minorities and the demographic characteristics of hired candidates. The article concludes by touching briefly on the lack of diverse institutions that most tech companies recruit from, which we discuss further below (Weise and Guynn, 2014).

More generally, there are significant numbers of Black college graduates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 10.5 percent of bachelor's degrees were earned by Black students in the 2016–2017 school year (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2019); however, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) reported that, in 2022, under its occupation category of “Management, professional, and related,” 9.1 percent of employed persons who held positions of “General and operations managers” were Black, while only 5.9 percent of “Chief executives” were Black.

The failure to consider diverse talent happens for a variety of reasons. For one, companies typically seek candidates from the same top universities, ignoring other

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universities even among the top 25. White males are often overrepresented in these top universities, whereas racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented. The private sector could better leverage organizations, such as America on Tech, that focus on connecting firms with qualified racial/ethnic minority students (Egbuna, 2021).

Hiring processes are another issue. Problems with hiring occur from the solicitation of applications to the review process, interviews, and final hiring decisions. Racial/ethnic minorities and women are less likely to apply for a job when they feel like they do not meet all the criteria in the job description (Tockey and Ignatova, 2019). Additionally, implicit and explicit biases can come into play during the review of resumes. Studies indicate that applicants with “black sounding” names receive callbacks at lower rates (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004). One author noted that while interviewing for

jobs, racial/ethnic minorities may struggle connecting with their interviewers because of a lack of shared experiences. Furthermore, in organizations dominated by White males, it is likely that racial/ethnic minorities and women will struggle to fit into the culture. Implicit and explicit biases may also play a role in final hiring decisions (Egbuna, 2021). Admittedly, a lateral entrant from a racial/ethnic minority group will have two burdens to overcome: (1) the normal trepidation of being an outsider and (2) potential difficulties associated with being an outsider to the military. These are conditions, however, that numerous people must overcome as they enter any other guild or professional domain, and it is well worth the effort for the military to recruit outsiders to bolster its overall innovation and diversity.

Lastly, as previously noted, even when women and racial/ethnic minorities do enter the pipeline, they are perceived as leaking out of the pipeline at higher rates because of personal reasons, such as women wanting to have families, or a lack of merit rather than as a result of structural barriers (Esposito and Gregory, 2021), which we suggest can be seen as the missing rungs in the more-apt broken ladder analogy. This misperception may once again lead recruiters to wrongly assume that there are simply not enough qualified and interested candidates with diverse backgrounds.

### Overcoming the Leaky Pipeline Myth

The DAF, along with DoD, should be aware of the obstacles that can prevent racial/ethnic minorities and women from being selected to fill positions both within the military and in the private sector, so that they can properly address those barriers. The DAF needs to systematically look for

broken rungs in the career ladder throughout the recruitment, accession, training, and promotion processes, including a historical analysis of how systematic barriers become institutionalized (Esposito and Gregory, 2021). Removing human interaction from certain parts of the hiring process may be a solution. For example, blind resume screening that looks solely at credentials is one effective practice (Butler and Denton, 2021). Using take-home assignments instead of interviews is one way that applicants could showcase their skills in an environment where they feel less pressure to connect with their interviewers (Egbuna, 2021). In the meantime, greater work needs to be done through strategic messaging to break down the perceptions that lead some—and particularly those with decisionmaking power—to incorrectly assume that there are simply not enough qualified, diverse candidates.

## Cultural Barriers

There are many potential cultural barriers that can discourage lateral entry, some of which stem from the conflict between civilian and military culture, and others that stem from cultural barriers within the armed services themselves. Although every organization requires a degree of acculturation, the U.S. military, and each branch of service, goes to extreme measures to indoctrinate new members to have pride in their service and their fellow service members. Such acculturation is done for practical military reasons, such as creating unit cohesion and a willingness to follow orders—even those that will put a person in harm's way—that are necessary in high-stakes, life-and-death situations, which are common to military operations. This culture creates a very insular view, however, in which

military members have greater trust for one another than “outsiders.”

As previously noted, lateral entrants may be intimidated and feel like outsiders before they acclimate to military culture and until they are fully accepted (if they ever are) by their military peers. This tension can present twin challenges in which lateral entrants do not feel welcome because of the bias toward homegrown talent, while military peers resent that those who have already “paid their dues” are losing opportunities to outsiders. Such challenges will be particularly true for those recruited into leadership positions; therefore, it will be crucial to design lateral entry programs that provide comprehensive training on leadership norms and practices unique to the military and that offer continued support from superiors.

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Lastly, in terms of diverse lateral entrants, many technical career fields within the military are populated primarily by White males. This can create a prevailing majority culture that racial/ethnic minorities and women may have trouble fitting into (Schulker et al., 2018), which can, in turn, create additional professional and cognitive stress for such lateral entrants.

### Transgressing Cultural Norms

There is also resistance to letting personnel transgress military norms and culture. Even when the role does not necessitate it, the military places a premium on personal standards, such as maintaining a conservative, military appearance. At one event discussing lateral entry, an officer joked, “this is still the military . . . we’re not going to let them have blue hair or anything” (Schneider, 2018). These standards are usually justified through arguments about maintaining unit cohesion and military culture, which are easier to enforce among junior candidates who are acculturated typically right out of high school or college and often seek military service because of their affinity with the military’s culture or mission.

These standards are also fundamentally easier for less diverse recruits to meet because they were tailored for White, Christian males. Acculturation to strict personal and lifestyle standards may be more difficult for established professionals, who are less likely to be willing to make major changes to their personal appearance, dress, or lifestyle choices. Particularly given the increasing acceptance and celebration of diversity in individual expression in the United States, this cultural difference may lead to challenges in the recruitment of lateral entrants.

### “No-Shave Chits” and Challenges to Physical Uniformity

Racial/ethnic minorities have specific challenges around physical appearance expectations. For example, some religious minorities, such as Sikhs, are obligated to maintain beards and wear turbans, which recently led to a lawsuit against the Marine Corps (Philipps, 2022). Black service members face a similar issue because of beard regulations: 45 percent of Black men in the U.S. Navy suffer from a condition known as pseudofolliculitis barbae, or what is commonly known as “razor bumps” (Ziezulewicz, 2022). When they shave, it produces inflamed bumps on their skin, which cause pain and discomfort. These personnel can obtain waivers, known as “no-shave chits” (also referred to as shaving waivers), but they are often looked down on or ridiculed as a result.

There has also been a recent movement to provide more leniency in how women are allowed to wear their hair in uniform; traditional standards are very difficult for many racial/ethnic minority women to maintain because their hair types differ from that assumed in traditional standards. Despite efforts to make such standards more racially neutral, resistance to their implementation has been widely reported (Beynon, 2021). Furthermore, women, in general, may struggle with equipment, facilities, uniforms, and standards designed for men. There have been some recent efforts, specifically related to designing uniforms more adequately for women’s bodies (Novelly, 2022); however, there are still widespread issues. For example, such things as firearm grip size, rucksacks, the size and weight of storage containers are still commonly designed for the standard male body, putting women at a perfor-

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mance disadvantage while also sending environmental cues that they do not belong.

### Overcoming Cultural Differences

These issues highlight cultural tensions within the services; indeed, a chief warrant officer reported a senior chief who wanted every sailor in command to refrain from getting no-shave chits, telling him, “I don’t understand all these cultures” (Ziezulewicz, 2022). These cultural differences can increase tension between diverse lateral entrants and service members who join the military in more conventional ways, which could, in turn, disincentivize civilian lateral entrants. However, as previously noted, cultural differences, when properly managed and accounted for, can also be a strength, particularly when it comes to establishing cultures of innovation. One study noted that when cultural differences are present in an organization, this can enable creative tension that fuels innovation. However, too much tension can threaten an organization’s culture—thus, it is critical to manage fault lines to minimize the negative effects these tensions can create (Jones, Chace, and Wright, 2020).

### Obstructionism and Naysayers

Unfortunately, there are some who are resistant to diversity, resistant to changes in military culture, or resistant to change more broadly. With an increase in DEIA efforts, especially those focused on expanding diversity, there is a higher likelihood of encountering resistance because heightened attention on the matter can lead to pushback. One study found that 31.4 percent of employees said that they experienced increased DEIA initiatives since 2020, while 44 percent of employees said that they saw an increase in the number of colleagues who feel that DEIA initiatives alienate them. Additionally, 42 percent of employees reported that DEIA initiatives were divisive (Rai and Dutkiewicz, 2022). A 2023 Pew Research Center study surveying a “nationally representative” sample of workers found that relatively few people place great importance on working in diverse spaces; the rates varied depending on the attribute (e.g., 32 percent of employees viewed racial/ethnic diversity as greatly important versus 26 percent for gender diversity). This same study found that opinions related to DEI at work vary by race, sex, age, and political affiliation—this last characteristic proves the strongest indicator of an individual’s perspectives on DEI efforts in their workplace (Minkin, 2023). The implication, then,

is that workplaces that are overwhelmingly populated by those who hold unfavorable or neutral views of DEIA initiatives (White, Republican-leaning men ages 50–64) could manifest resistance to DEIA-related change.

The resistance to change, particularly in regard to DEIA initiatives, typically stems from several threats that are perceived by an advantaged group: (1) concern over whether they will lose access to resources and opportunities, (2) concern that their culture and norms will be replaced, and (3) resistance to feeling guilt that their group is perpetuating inequality (Iyer, 2022). These opponents of change can hinder or block the success of initiatives, such as lateral entry programs. Typically, obstructionist behaviors are exhibited in several ways: denial, disengagement, and derailment.

*Denial* is when an employee believes that a lack of DEIA is not a problem. Those in denial fail to acknowledge why marginalized groups experience underrepresentation. They might espouse such sentiments as “I am color blind”

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To counteract obstructionists, leaders need to provide sound arguments for why DEIA efforts will make the organization stronger.

and “everyone has the same opportunities to succeed in the military.”

*Disengagement* arises when an employee is aware of structural inequities but does not want to actively address the problem: They are often scared of saying the wrong thing, feel that they do not have enough time and energy to engage in DEIA efforts, and/or do not believe DEIA is a major factor in mission success.

Finally, *derailment* occurs when an employee tries to switch the focus away to the experiences of the dominant group. Two recent examples of this are the All Lives Matter response to the Black Lives Matter movement and arguing that race/ethnicity and gender have less impact on people’s lives than socioeconomic class does (Rai and Dutkiewicz, 2022). Leaders must communicate with those who are obstructing DEIA initiatives and help these obstructionists find the language to communicate why they are resistant.

### Overcoming Obstructionists and Naysayers

Obstructionism can be minimized by addressing the concerns of opponents as best as possible and reinforcing the importance of supporting policies even when opponents do not agree with them. Such efforts require senior leadership to accurately predict what concerns or perceived threats DEIA initiatives may give rise to and preemptively address these concerns while strategically communicating why the organization needs increased diversity. Merely relying on moral arguments is not enough. To counteract obstructionists, leaders need to provide sound arguments for why DEIA efforts will make the organization stronger—ideally, arguments that are backed by the ample data showing the benefits of diversity to innovation and problem-solving (Rai and Dutkiewicz, 2022).

## Considerations for Implementing Lateral Entry Initiatives

There are several important factors to consider when structuring initiatives to increase lateral entry. Considerations for implementation, which we discuss in more detail below, include developing strategies to manage, acculturate, and accept lateral entrants throughout their careers; proactively managing strategic messaging to highlight the program's positive aspects and address any negative perceptions; redesigning benefits and incentives; and establishing tangible goals and metrics.

### Talent Management Life Cycle as a Holistic Approach

When developing lateral entry initiatives, overcoming the barriers discussed above will not automatically provide a supply of highly qualified and diverse candidates; therefore, it is crucial for the Air Force to also redesign aspects of its current recruitment plan. With this said, it is equally—if not more—important to take a holistic approach to effectively manage new talent throughout the *entire* talent management life cycle, which includes “talent acquisition, development, utilization, evaluation, compensation, retention, and transition” (Secretary of the Air Force, 2019, p. 7). It does no good to successfully recruit talent then fail to retain it, or worse, create anti-recruiters who discourage future talent from joining in the first place. Examining patterns at each of these milestones in the talent management life cycle will better enable the DAF and DoD to attract, grow, and retain lateral entrant talent.

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### Buy-In and Strategic Messaging

To create effective lateral entry policies and programs, more analysis is needed to understand how the military as a whole can integrate lateral entrants and make the process smooth and efficient. Such integration may necessitate a culture change or addressing the concerns of obstructionists more fully. Better strategic messaging is also needed to justify the need for lateral entry and to counter unhelpful yet popular narratives. Opponents of lateral entry might not appreciate the talent and skills that lateral entry personnel can bring and instead fixate on the idea that bringing in lateral entry personnel makes the military soft or weak. However, developing a strategic messaging plan that includes data and examples can counter these perceptions.

## Benefits and Incentives

In previous lateral entry initiatives, veterans who had prior service in either the same service or a different one were sought after because they could be trained and acculturated much faster than those with no military experience. However, the process of re-entry or transitioning services is complicated, and applicants may face long delays and other frustrating hurdles because of the nature of job placement. This difficulty sends a signal to those with prior service that they are not valued and disincentivizes potential entrants (Levy et al., 2004); therefore, it is essential to design lateral entry programs in a way that actually *appeals* to prospective candidates.

Additionally, the Navy found it difficult to attract people who had previously served because of low salaries and inflexible retirement plans.<sup>5</sup> New programs need to reconsider how prior work experience is evaluated and how lateral entrants can be properly compensated, while taking into account that military personnel already serving might perceive lateral entry as unfair when comparing it with their own recruitment. This perception may require the DAF to make substantial changes to or restructure its ranking or pay grade system and communicate these changes to all service members so that there is a common understanding of the potential differences in pay grade to reduce the resentment of current service members.

The DAF should also consider alternative incentives that will help lateral entrants overcome some of the personal obstacles that they may face when joining the military in the mid- to late-career stages. Such incentives could include longer duty assignments in one place for those who have spouses or children not accustomed to regular moves or even permanent assignments in high-

tech hubs or locations where remote work is possible for certain lateral entrants.

As noted above, compensation for highly skilled lateral entrants must be considered, including authorization for higher signing bonuses, in addition to guaranteed placement at more desirable posts and/or greater focus on recruitment into reserve or individual mobilization augmentee positions that may allow highly skilled recruits to retain their higher civilian salary while still filling critical gaps in the Air Force. Lastly, physical fitness standards should continue to be assessed in relation to the career field and required duties to attract and retain as many highly skilled STEM service members as possible. Ultimately, the DAF may still struggle to attract the right talent in the right numbers until and unless the right combination of incentives and compensation is developed.

## Establishing Program Objectives and Milestones

A successful lateral entry program needs clear, quantifiable objectives and milestones at each phase of the talent management life cycle to facilitate effective implementation. Providing such quantifiable metrics strengthens strategic messaging by moving the problem from an anecdotal setting to an empirical one, thus arming DEIA initiatives with hard evidence. These metrics could include a variety of factors across the talent management life cycle, including rates of recruitment, accession, and selection (including promotion); job satisfaction; attrition; and retirement. Metrics should also include how other military personnel perceive lateral entrants and their performance. The various services should establish objectives and examine these

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# The DAF is facing serious shortfalls in cultivating diverse leadership; these shortfalls put its ability to maintain a competitive advantage over near-peer adversaries at risk.

numbers on a regular basis. It will be important to measure how well lateral entrants are acculturating to DoD and service culture. This analysis could be done through surveys and interviews and by tracking the percentages of positive and negative opinions of lateral entrants and of other service members.

Additionally, metrics should be developed—through a rigorous research and evaluation process—to quantify the added value and increase in mission success and organizational objectives of lateral entry programs. This is an important objective for DEIA initiatives more broadly, but it would be particularly impactful for lateral entry programs.

## Conclusion

The DAF is facing serious shortfalls in cultivating diverse leadership, both in terms of people and the skill sets they have. These shortfalls put its ability to maintain a competitive advantage over near-peer adversaries at risk, particularly as the U.S. focus shifts to the Indo-Pacific and increasingly technology-driven conflicts. The dearth of diverse leadership cannot be addressed solely through homegrown talent; therefore, DoD and the DAF must begin to put in place initiatives that draw in mid- to senior-level talent from external sources through the use of lateral

entry. However, merely opening lateral entry opportunities is not enough. Rather, lateral entry initiatives need to be carefully planned while accounting for their costs and benefits, as well as the barriers that could prevent them from being successful.

Lessons learned from existing and previously implemented lateral entry efforts should be considered. Historically, lateral entry programs have been used to infuse diverse sources of expertise into the military from such fields as medicine, but they have always been small programs. These programs should be examined to determine best practices and any areas of improvement. For example, it would be helpful to know how many otherwise qualified physicians were removed or had their promotions delayed and subsequently left the military for failing physical fitness tests and, more generally, which past lateral entrants thrived.

Another opportunity to learn from previous programs is highlighted through an example from the Navy, whose efforts were small scale yet lacked coordination across programs and faltered. One issue was that the programs lacked customized training based on civilians' age and experience. For instance, a 45-year-old with a Ph.D. was trained the exact same way as an 18-year-old coming straight from high school (Levy et al., 2004). This practice is inefficient

and can be off-putting for civilians coming into the military with significant private-sector experience.

Regarding growing more-diverse leadership, as noted, there are a multitude of barriers and systemic inequities that prevent racial/ethnic minority service members from rising in the ranks at equitable rates. For example, when racial/ethnic minorities or women see few leaders that look like them, they can suffer both from a lack of mentoring and a lack of confidence in their ability to continue rising in the ranks (whether this manifests in a lack of confidence in their individual abilities or their ability to succeed within a biased system). Additionally, when even only a few of the people who are tasked with selecting service members for promotion and career-enhancing opportunities hold implicit or explicit bias, it greatly slows down the change in leadership ranks. Furthermore, the lack of diverse senior leadership reinforces itself by making it harder to recruit diverse talent.

As discussed earlier, DoD and the DAF should seriously consider the pros and cons of enforcing certain per-

sonal standards in the military. Autonomy is increasingly valued in the workplace (Reisinger and Fetterer, 2021), and although strict controls over appearance can plausibly result in a sense of cohesiveness and identity, the actual effects need to be explored and quantified. Such analysis will allow DoD and the DAF to fully understand the costs and benefits of traditional military norms and requirements. Some requirements are likely to be worth keeping, while others may no longer be necessary.

With the proper management of cultural tensions and efforts to sustain buy-in, the full integration of lateral entrants into every stage of the talent management life cycle, suitable incentives and benefits, and a plan for measuring the outcomes of initiatives, lateral entry programs can be the solution to increasing the level of diverse senior talent and filling some of the gaps in mid- to senior-level technical expertise and innovation in the Air Force, in particular, and throughout DoD.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Across the services, more-senior officers range from major to colonel (field grade) to general or flag officers above the rank of colonel. Officers at the colonel and general officer levels are under a separate management structure and have different selection processes and limitations on them than those of the senior-most officers.

<sup>2</sup> As one example of DoD's response to this identified need, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness hosted an inaugural Talent Management Innovation Challenge from August 11, 2023, to September 30, 2023, to "capture the diversity of thought, experience, background, and capability offered by our total force and bring forth new ideas on improving talent management across [DoD]" (DoD, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the *New York Times* reported on the continued observations that there are very few people of color who hold senior ranks within the military: "Of the 41 most senior commanders in the military—those with four-star rank in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard—only two are black: Gen. Michael X. Garrett, who leads the Army's Forces Command, and Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr, the commander of Pacific Air Forces" (Cooper, 2021).

In the wake of George Floyd's murder that same year, the U.S. government and military services sponsored or conducted an increased number of analyses and investigations to explore racial disparities, exemplified by the Independent Racial Disparity Review conducted by the Air Force Inspector General (Inspector General, 2020; Inspector General, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> We use the term *pipeline* in this publication because it is widely understood and commonly used within DoD and the DAF to refer to the talent management life cycle; however, recent research suggests that the term pipeline has a negative connotation for racial/ethnic minorities who associate it with the school-to-prison pipeline (Jackson et al., 2022). Over time, DoD should consider transitioning to less racially loaded terminology, such as *pathway*.

<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the Blended Retirement System in 2018 combined the previously established pension scheme with the Thrift Savings Plan system. It was designed to ensure that more service members receive retirement benefits, and it is akin to a 401k plan for anyone who serves for more than two and less than 20 years.

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## About This Paper

Organizations can either grow leaders and cultivate innovation from within, or they must import human capital from the external market. There is evidence that human capital shortfalls exist within the U.S. Air Force in terms of both uniformed senior leader diversity and innovation. Regulatory sufficiency and benchmarked interest across the U.S. military services substantiate an increased level of effort in exploring and implementing lateral entry initiatives to mitigate current and future shortfalls in both uniformed senior leader diversity and innovation.

Correspondingly, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) could benefit from using lateral entry programs for field grade officers and above to support the increasing demand in technological career fields—such as for senior-level cyber and space workforces. The talent that could be migrated into the service could also increase the diversity needed to grow and develop leaders, which, under current strength levels, has not been possible. This publication may have broader applicability to the sister services across the U.S. Department of Defense—all of which are navigating how to best implement lateral entry programs.

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