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AIR FORCE POLICY FOR ADVANCED EDUCATION

I congratulate Maj Tobias Switzer for his well-written article “Air Force Policy for Advanced Education: Production of Human Capital or Cheap Signals?” (Winter 2011). The author’s interpretations of the data are reasonable, and his reasoning is logical and complete. I agree with his conclusion that, through its promotion policies, the Air Force has sent the clear signal that obtaining advanced degrees is important for promotion, regardless of whether the degrees are related to job requirements or are needed to satisfy those requirements. “Checking the box” is the logical response.

In general, I believe that education is good, that more is better, and that it can benefit both the individual and the organization for which he or she works. Consequently, I disagree with Major Switzer’s conclusion that much of the time and resources spent in pursuit of these degrees is wasted and that the education gained is irrelevant or useless to the Air Force. Nevertheless, he has a point when he questions why the Air Force should pay for someone to get a degree in basket weaving if it doesn’t have any need for anyone who knows how to weave baskets. To me, this raises a larger issue than whether advanced degrees should be a factor in selection for promotion—specifically, the issue of how well the Air Force maximizes the development of its people, best matches them to the jobs it needs done, and realizes the most benefits from their knowledge, skills, and abilities, regardless of degree level or grade.

Promotions are just a part of this process and not necessarily the driving part. Assignments, training, education, and manpower might be just as or more important than promotions in producing these outcomes. In fact, one could argue that the Air Force’s promotion system works to the detriment of such results. Because the current system doesn’t closely link promotions to future assignments, it doesn’t best



match each person's qualifications to the needs of his or her next job. Whereas the commercial world competitively promotes into a position, selecting the individual whose qualifications, including education, best match the needs of the position, the Air Force promotes first and then finds a suitable position for the promotee. Grade and education factor into the service's assignment process, but so do other aspects, such as time on station. The current assignment system does not send either a clear or strong signal to Air Force members about the degree fields, levels, sources, or timing they should pursue.

Finally—and perhaps most corrosive to beneficial outcomes—is the culture that regards promotions and grade attained as the ultimate marker of personal career success. Much more than not, the Air Force culture views jobs and degrees as paths to promotion, not the other way around. When, if ever, this practice is reversed—that is, when jobs accomplished are seen as the marker of career success and education, and when promotions are seen as paths to job opportunities—then degree “signals” will finally align with Air Force success.

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