



*We encourage you to e-mail your comments to us at [aspj@maxwell.af.mil](mailto:aspj@maxwell.af.mil). We reserve the right to edit your remarks.*

## **AIR FORCE POLICY FOR ADVANCED EDUCATION**

Maj Tobias Switzer's article "Air Force Policy for Advanced Education: Production of Human Capital or Cheap Signals?" (Winter 2011) is extensively researched and very well written. However, I believe that his assumption that only two reasons exist for most officers engaging in voluntary off-duty education programs (promotion or improving their service to the Air Force) misses the mark. A third, and possibly more relevant, reason for seeking advanced civilian degrees involves preparation for transition to civilian employment upon separation or retirement. Many officers utilize educational benefits for future employment, sometimes totally outside their active duty Air Force specialty code (AFSC). (It would be interesting to see the correlation between a graduate's degrees earned and AFSC.) In the Air National Guard, as in the active duty Air Force, one assumes that anyone seeking promotion beyond O-5 has attained a graduate degree, preferably an MBA or a master's degree related to his or her duty area or the area to which that person wishes to advance. That assumption remains consistent with the intent of Gen T. Michael Moseley, the former Air Force chief of staff. Major Switzer's premise that advanced academic degrees (AAD) signal commitment is questionable based on the third possibility. Who would not find time to complete free education and degrees that would increase one's income potential upon retirement from the active forces? Furthermore, some officers are fortunate enough to utilize duty time for completing classes, studies, or research papers. Assuming that the officer wants to attain the highest rank possible before retiring with as many credentials as possible, AADs would indicate less, not more, loyalty to the Air Force.

I do fully concur with Major Switzer's point that officers complete professional military education by correspondence to enhance their chances of attending in residence. I have never understood why the Air Force would want or could afford to pay for the same training



twice. If the resident and nonresident courses offer the same curriculum, then having officers repeat the training is wasteful.

I propose taking Major Switzer's ideas relative to the Army program a step further. Since the Air Force does not require retention of as many officers as does the Army, the Air Force would not be well served by holding degree seekers to a contractual service obligation, like the Army. Doing so would probably result in separation bonuses for newly degreed midgrade officers. Nevertheless, I do agree with the immersion and cross-pollination aspects—so much so that I would suggest that active duty Air Force officers desiring to acquire AADs be transferred to reserve status, utilize the GI Bill or like funding to earn the degree, and then return to active status. Officers can execute a permanent change of station to the university of their choice; use their allowance for tuition, books, and housing; and maintain readiness by performing unit training assemblies with a nearby Guard or Reserve unit or an ROTC detachment. This scenario would reduce costs to the Air Force, increase our exposure to the citizens we are defending, and allow us to concentrate our efforts on learning, in addition to numerous other benefits for both the individual and the Air Force, as noted by Major Switzer.

Air Force officers should use AADs to develop skills and abilities and thereby develop human capital for use by the service—not to seek promotion, show loyalty, or prepare for a second career. Relevancy and applicability to Air Force requirements should determine the need to expend precious dollars in the future.

**Lt Col Loretta J. Lombard, FLANG**  
*MacDill AFB, Florida*

## **AIR FORCE POLICY FOR ADVANCED EDUCATION: THE AUTHOR REPLIES**

Lieutenant Colonel Lombard shares some interesting thoughts, and I thank her for engaging me and the Air Force community on this important issue. After the publication of my article, I received many



messages from across the Air Force and the Department of Defense. Not everyone agreed with my analysis or conclusions, but those who reached out to me believe that something is profoundly wrong with the status quo. The Air Force has set up a system in which officers are highly incentivized and subsidized to acquire meaningless advanced degrees.

It should come as no mystery why officers engage in suboptimal behaviors such as pursuing advanced degrees at educational institutions of poor quality. Over several decades, our senior leaders have created a system, a culture, and powerful incentives to pursue advanced education for reasons other than increasing skills and abilities relevant to the Air Force. Our officer corps is simply responding, in the most efficient manner, to the set of incentives placed in front of it. If our senior leaders are not happy with the outcomes, then they must change the incentive structure or expand the set of available opportunities.

Lieutenant Colonel Lombard's idea offers an excellent alternative to my admittedly expensive solution. Why not let officers take a two-year sabbatical and pursue graduate studies at their own expense, using the post-9/11 GI bill? With thoughtful study and design, the Air Force could create a program to give officers time off to study without hurting their careers. The service could place them in some type of reserve status, requiring only a physical examination and a physical fitness test every year. Upon completion of graduate studies, the officers could return to active duty and be placed in a promotion year group two years junior, thereby avoiding a penalty against their original cohort, which would have continued to gain experience and performance reports during the officers' sabbatical. Such a program would permit maximum flexibility to pursue a degree of choice and expand educational opportunities at little or no direct cost to the Air Force. I commend Lieutenant Colonel Lombard for sharing this idea.

**Maj Tobias Switzer, USAF**  
*Hurlburt Field, Florida*



**Let us know what you think! Leave a comment!**

**Distribution A: Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.**

**Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in the *Journal* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government.

This article may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If it is reproduced, the *Air and Space Power Journal* requests a courtesy line.

<http://www.airpower.au.af.mil>