



## MLDC Research Areas

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This issue paper aims to aid in the deliberations of the MLDC. It does not contain the recommendations of the MLDC.

Military Leadership Diversity Commission  
1851 South Bell Street  
Arlington, VA 22202  
(703) 602-0818

<http://mldc.whs.mil/>

# Military Occupations and Implications for Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity Officers

## Abstract

Across DoD, flag (or general) officers tend to advance from occupations related to tactical operations, which are closely linked to the overall mission of each Service. However, tactical occupations tend to have higher concentrations of white non-Hispanic officers and male officers. Recent data suggest that individuals' occupational preferences at the time of initial occupational assignment play a role in this dynamic. However, the reasons why women and racial/ethnic minorities do not choose tactical occupations are not fully known. If the trend of women and minorities choosing nontactical occupations continues—along with the trend of senior leadership ranks being filled by officers from tactical occupations—racial/ethnic and gender representation at the highest levels of the U.S. military will continue to be limited.

In each Service of the U.S. military,<sup>1</sup> flag (or general) officers (pay grades O-7 to O-10) tend to come from the subset of occupations most closely linked to the Service's overall mission. In the Army and the Marine Corps, flag officers tend to come from the combat occupations (e.g., Infantry). In the Air Force, flag officers are most often pilots by trade. In the Navy, most flag officers come from the Unrestricted Line communities (e.g., Surface Warfare). These occupations also tend to have higher concentrations of white male officers than other occupations, which has an impact on the demographics of the most-senior levels of leadership. This issue paper characterizes the complex relationship between occupation and demographics while summarizing the implications for racial/ethnic and gender diversity at the highest levels.

## Senior Leaders Tend to Come from Tactical Occupations

Figure 1 shows the percentage of December 2008 active-component flag officers who served in tactical<sup>2</sup> (i.e., warfighting) occupations before becoming flag officers. As a benchmark,<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 also includes the corresponding percentages for the active-component O-3 pay grade<sup>4</sup> (i.e., a captain in the Army, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps and a lieutenant in Navy). Figure 1 demonstrates that officers from tactical occupations make up a much larger fraction of the flag officer corps than officers from the lower ranks, although this difference varies by Service and is somewhat less extreme in the Navy. This pattern suggests that a tactical background is important for officers seeking to break into the flag ranks.

Even among the flag officers, the fraction of officers from tactical occupations slightly increases with rank. This trend can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the percentage of active-component officers from tactical backgrounds for each flag rank along with the corresponding percentage for the active-component O-3 pay grade. From these data, it is clear that officers with tactical backgrounds tend to populate the highest levels of military leadership.

This pattern has ramifications for racial/ethnic and gender diversity because, compared with other occupations, tactical occupations tend to have higher concentrations of white males. As an example, Figure 3 shows the percentage of tactical and nontactical officers in pay grade O-3 who are white males. (For reference, it also shows the percentage of white males among all flag officers.) Even at the O-3 level, 75 percent of all officers in tactical occupations are white males, compared with 50 percent of the officers in nontactical occupations. To be sure, the demographics of recent flag officers depend on the

demographics of their own cohort and not on the demographics of officers recently at the O-3 level. Nonetheless, Figure 3 demonstrates that the tendency of tactical occupations to contain higher fractions of white males persists. To the degree that the tactical sector has better career prospects in the U.S. military, racial/ethnic and gender diversity in senior leadership ranks will be limited by the demographic composition of tactical occupations.

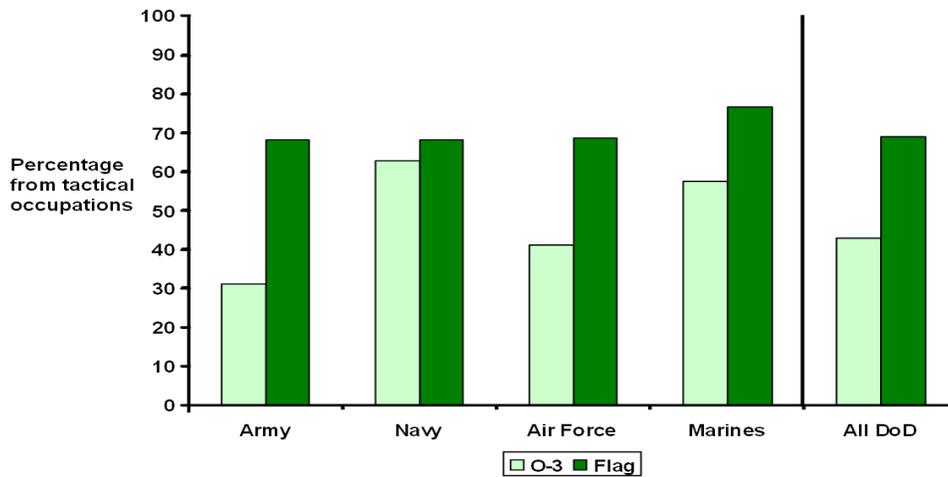
**What Are Some Potential Reasons for Minority and/or Female Officer Underrepresentation in Tactical Occupations?**

**The Initial Officer Occupational-Assignment Process.** To understand possible reasons why minority and/or female officers are underrepresented in tactical occupations, one must understand how officer candidates<sup>5</sup> are initially assigned to

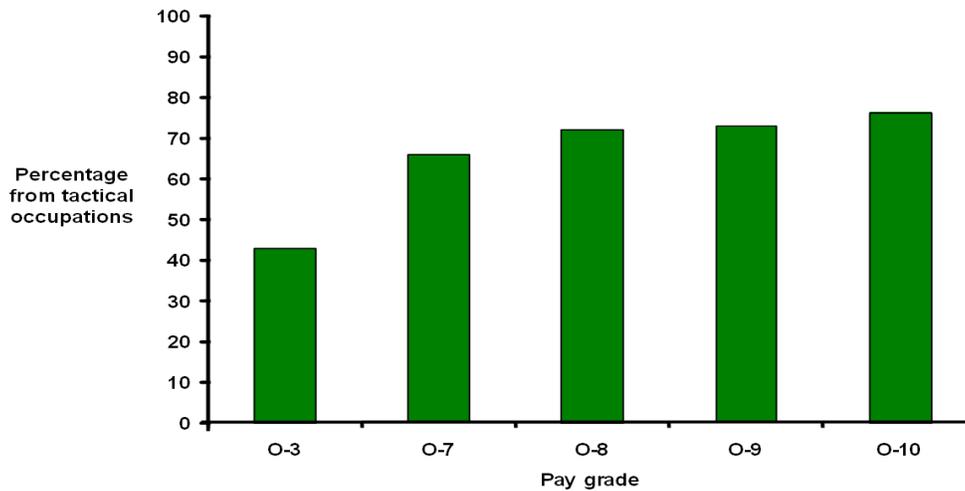
occupational areas. Below is a brief description of the initial officer occupational-assignment process.

The Department of Defense (DoD) assigns officer candidates to occupations through the same general process across the various Services and commission sources. Each Service allocates a certain number of available slots for each occupation to each officer commission source<sup>6</sup> (except for the Marine Corps, where all occupations are assigned at The Basic School). Typically, officer candidates enrolled in a program provide their preferred occupations, and the commission source then allocates the available occupations to qualified applicants using a universal merit ranking based on applicant performance (e.g., academic performance while attending a Service academy). Individuals at the top of the list are the first to receive occupations. When an individual's first-choice occupation is full, the individual receives his or

**Figure 1: Percentage of Officers in Tactical Occupations in December 2008**



**Figure 2: Percentage of Officers in Tactical Occupations in December 2008, by Pay Grade**



her second-choice occupation, if it is available, and so on. Although the specifics of the occupation-assignment systems differ by Service and commission source,<sup>7</sup> they all follow this basic blueprint: Rising officers compete on the basis of merit for their preferred occupations.

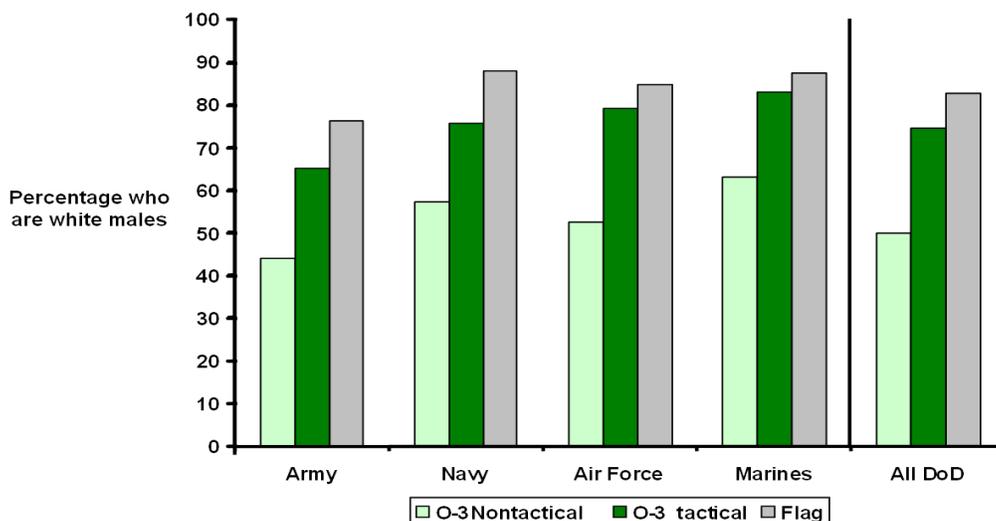
This brief description of the initial officer occupational-assignment process suggests different factors that may affect the underrepresentation of minority and/or female officers in tactical occupations. One potential factor concerns occupational preferences. That is, minority and/or female officers may indicate preferences for nontactical (e.g., administrative) occupations at higher rates than do white males. Another potential factor relates to rank on the merit list used to assign officers to occupational areas. Specifically, minority and/or female officers may prefer tactical occupations, but, because they may be ranked lower (on average) than white and/or male officers, they are less likely to get their first choices. A third potential factor has to do with the concentration of minority and/or female officers in commission sources that receive fewer tactical slots. For example, in fiscal year (FY) 2009, non-Hispanic black Army officers made up 21 percent of graduates from Officer Candidate School (OCS) but only 9 percent of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) graduates and 7 percent of West Point graduates (U.S. Army, 2009a). If Army OCS received fewer tactical slots than Army ROTC and West Point in FY 2009, then non-Hispanic black Army officers may be less able to enter tactical occupations than are white officers (assuming similar preferences and merit rankings). Ultimately, one, all, or some combination of these three factors may be creating the observed concentration of white males in tactical occupations.

In the case of male officers, at least, the available evidence suggests that a major reason why tactical occupations have high concentrations of white males is because white males prefer tactical occupations at much higher rates than

do minority males. Using FY 2007 Army ROTC Branching Board data for assignments of male officer candidates,<sup>8</sup> Lim, Marquis, Hall, Schulker, and Zhuo (2009) found that minority male officer candidates were less likely than white male officer candidates to indicate preferences for Combat Arms<sup>9</sup> (i.e., tactical) occupations. All race/ethnicity groups received their preferred occupations at similar rates, despite the tendency of minority officer candidates to have lower average merit rankings than the white officer candidates. Thus, Lim et al. concluded that the divergent preferences (rather than the differences in merit ranking) were the primary cause of the high concentration of white officers in the tactical occupations in the Army. Recent data support these findings. Data on Air Force officer preferences presented at the MLDC's November 2009 meeting showed that the group of officers that preferred rated (i.e., tactical) occupations in 2009 contained a higher percentage of males and whites than did other occupations. Across two Services with two different core missions, data were consistent with the theory that divergent preferences primarily drive the high concentration of white males in tactical occupations.

**Female Officers and Combat Exclusions.** Although initial occupation preferences affect the racial/ethnic distribution of males in tactical occupations, less is known about what drives the underrepresentation of women in tactical occupations. One obvious factor for women is that current DoD policy bars women from serving in an occupation or position involving direct offensive ground combat (Harrell & Miller, 1997; Segal & Segal, 2004). That is, some occupations are completely closed to women (e.g., Special Forces), and women in combat occupations that are not closed cannot serve with units that are likely to engage in direct offensive ground combat. Since policy changes in 1993 greatly expanded opportunities for women to serve in the Navy, and to some extent, the Air Force, this policy is most restrictive in the Army and

Figure 3: Percentage of White Males in Nontactical and Tactical Occupations in December 2008, by Service



Marine Corps. Women can serve in 91 percent of Army occupations and 92 percent of Marine Corps occupations, but only 70 percent of positions in the Army and 62 percent of positions in the Marine Corps can be filled with women under current policy. By contrast, 99 percent of Air Force occupations and 94 percent of Navy occupations are open to women, as well as 99 percent of Air Force positions and 91 percent of Navy positions<sup>10</sup> (Segal & Segal, 2004). All occupations in the Coast Guard have been open to women since 1978 (U.S. Coast Guard, n.d.).

If all combat restrictions for women were removed, it is not entirely clear that greater representation of women in tactical operations would follow (at least not immediately). As suggested in the previous section, greater female representation in tactical occupations would depend on several factors, including the supply of qualified women who desired to serve in the newly opened tactical occupations. More research on female officers' initial occupational preferences would be needed to make any predictions about the impact of revoking the policy of combat restrictions for women.

## Conclusion

The high concentration of white male officers in the flag ranks is partly a result of the high concentration of white male officers in tactical occupations. Recent research and data suggest that differences in initial career field preferences partly explain the high concentration of white male officers in tactical operations. However, little is known about the reasons why initial officer occupational preferences differ along racial/ethnic or gender lines. Regardless of the reasons for this difference, initial officer occupational classification has important implications for demographic diversity at the highest ranks of military leadership.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This issue paper focuses on the four DoD services. We were not able to include the Coast Guard in the analysis because Defense Manpower Data Center personnel data for the Coast Guard were not available.

<sup>2</sup>To facilitate inter-Service comparisons, we hereafter rely on DoD's occupational-classification system. DoD defines tactical occupations to include all pilots, officers in occupations directly involving ground or naval arms, ballistic-missile system officers, and combat and operations staff officers. The fact that some staff officers may not have originated in tactical occupations creates a potential for misclassification. To deal with this problem, we only classify officers as having come from tactical occupations if they held tactical occupations before reaching the grade of O-6. In addition, our source data included Service occupation codes, which were useful in checking whether officers were properly classified as coming from tactical occupations.

<sup>3</sup>This benchmark could be misleading because it compares recent O-3 officers with recent flag officers, ignoring changes in occupations across generations of officers. This comparison would be inappropriate if the fraction of the O-3 pay grade that is tactical has in fact decreased over time. A better benchmark (for which data were unavailable) would be the corresponding percentages for the O-3 pay grade from the era when today's flag officers were in that pay grade.

<sup>4</sup>The O-3 pay grade is convenient for an occupational snapshot for technical reasons. First, many officers below the O-3 pay grade have occupational codes that indicate "training" rather than their ultimate occupation. Second, many officers above the O-3 pay grade are in executive or staff jobs, which is a separate occupational code.

<sup>5</sup>By *officer candidates*, we mean individuals who have yet to be assigned to their first occupational area. The Services may use different terms, such as *cadets*, to describe these individuals.

<sup>6</sup>Officer-commission sources are as follows: ROTC programs at colleges and universities, Service military academies (e.g., West Point for the Army), and Officer Training School (for the Air Force)/OCS (for the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard).

<sup>7</sup>In some cases, the fraction of highly ranked people in each occupation is capped to ensure that quality gets distributed across the occupations. A detailed description of occupational assignment systems by Service and commission source can be found in the appendix of Lim et al. (2009).

<sup>8</sup>Female officers were not included in the analysis because women are restricted by policy from entering certain tactical occupations.

<sup>9</sup>In FY 2007, the Army grouped its occupations into three categories: Combat Arms, Combat Support, and Combat Service Support. Combat Arms occupations included Air Defense Artillery, Armor, Aviation, Corps of Engineers, Field Artillery, and Infantry. Based on an Army briefing at the MLDC November 2009 meeting, the Army has renamed its three occupational categories Maneuver, Fire and Effects (formerly Combat Arms); Operational Support (formerly Combat Support); and Force Sustainment (formerly Combat Service Support). A few occupational fields were also reclassified: Military Police and the Chemical Corps were moved out of Operational Support and into Maneuver, Fire and Effects.

<sup>10</sup>These numbers refer to both officer and enlisted occupations and positions.

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