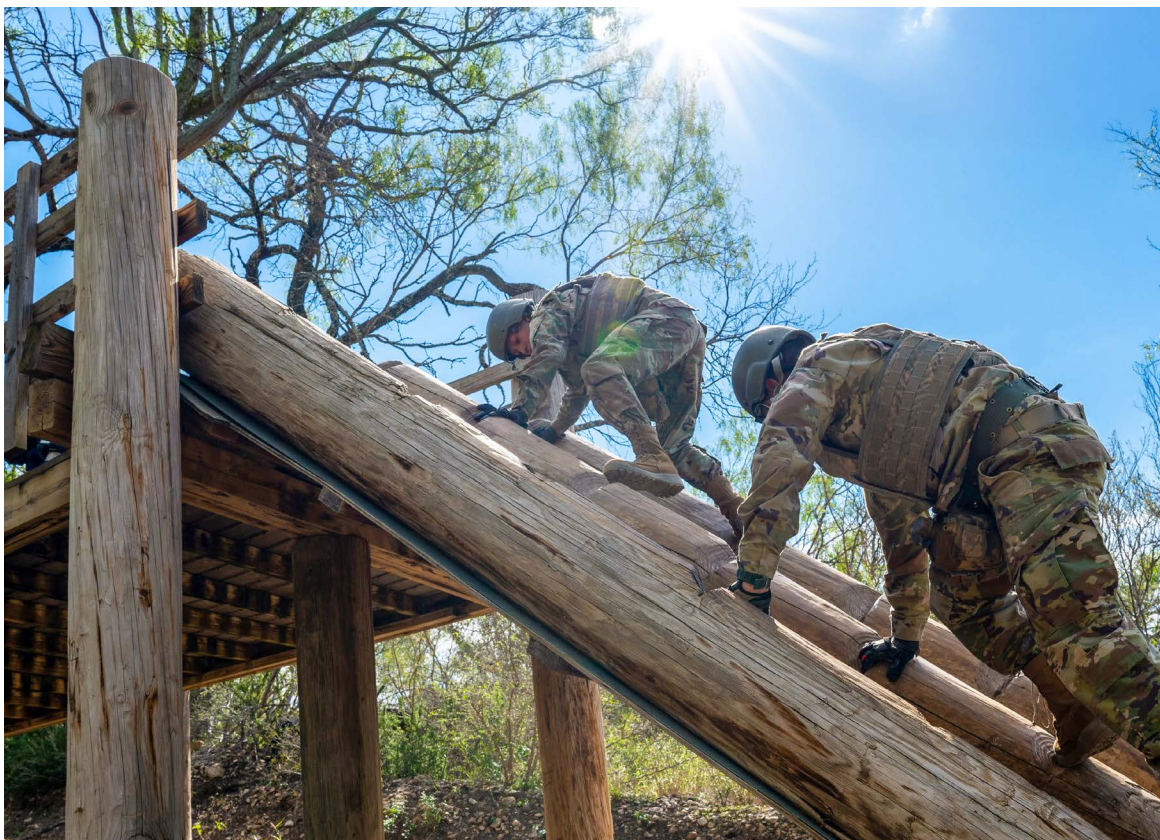




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Cultivating a Warrior Ethos in the Air Force

Strategies for Developing Airminded Warriors
in Initial Training



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RRA3738-1.

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About This Report

This report documents findings and recommendations from a RAND Project AIR FORCE project to examine how the U.S. Air Force’s sister services build strong service identities, identify lessons learned from sister services’ efforts, and recommend how the Air Force can apply those lessons to strengthen its own identity among Airmen. The report provides context on recent Air Force efforts, starting at Basic Military Training (BMT), to develop what leaders call *Airminded Warriors*—Airmen who have a deep understanding of the Air Force’s mission and embrace the service’s core values and a warrior ethos. The report highlights findings from interviews with those who served in sister services on their experiences with how their services developed their service identities (e.g., as Soldiers in the U.S. Army), as well as how current Air Force training instructors, leaders, and technical trainees view their Air Force identities and recent training efforts to develop trainees’ identities. We highlight a framework of strategies to instill service identities to present findings and recommendations on what the Air Force might be able to adapt from what sister services have done to instill service identities. We also provide recommendations on how to evaluate recent Air Force changes to BMT to develop *Airminded Warriors*, and we comment on the contextual factors that could affect the success of the Air Force’s efforts.

RAND Project AIR FORCE

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This publication documents work originally shared with the DAF on September 22, 2025. The draft, dated September 2025, was reviewed by formal peer reviewers and DAF subject-matter experts. Since the delivery of this report, Second Air Force has made several significant updates to BMT. To the extent possible, we have updated our language to reflect these changes (e.g., changing *warfighter* to *warrior*) and updated our recommendations so that they continue to be relevant while BMT changes continue.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of War or the U.S. Government. Review of this material does not imply U.S. Department of War endorsement of factual accuracy or opinion.

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We could not have completed this project without the many individuals who participated in interviews and focus groups. We begin by thanking our RAND colleagues who shared their insights and experiences from serving in the military. We also thank the Air Force training instructors and leaders and the many technical trainees who offered their perspectives on Air Force identities and the efforts that the Air Force is taking to develop those identities.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge RAND colleagues who provided guidance or support for the project. First, we thank Nelson Lim and Sean Robson, the former and current directors, respectively, of the Workforce, Development, and Health Program in PAF. We also extend our gratitude to other RAND staff and Air Force fellows at RAND for their support throughout the project (in alphabetical order by last name): Lawrese Brown (literature review and interview notetaking), Darlette Gayle (interview scheduling), Kimberly Curry Hall (interview facilitation), Kelly Piazza (literature review and document search), Frank Scopa (Air Force document review), and Chloe Ullah (Air Force document review). Finally, we thank our reviewers, Sandra Kay Evans and Miriam Matthews, for their helpful insights on the report.

Summary

Issue

The Department of the Air Force is making several changes to the U.S. Air Force's Basic Military Training (BMT) and technical training programs to develop *Airminded Warriors*—Airmen who have a deep understanding of the Air Force's mission and embrace the service's core values and a warrior ethos. In addition, they should be prepared to perform beyond their specific functional roles (career fields) to execute Air Force missions across domains and functions. As it makes changes to BMT and technical training to develop Airminded Warriors, Second Air Force asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to examine how the Air Force's sister services build strong service identities, to identify lessons learned, and to recommend how the Air Force can apply those lessons to strengthen its own identity in Airmen.

Approach

We used a qualitative approach that included literature and document reviews, interviews, focus groups, and observations. Data collection focused on interviews and focus groups, supplemented by observations of PACER FORGE Provisional,¹ the culminating BMT field exercise:

- **sister-service interviews:** Fifty RAND staff and fellows who served in other military services discussed how their services shaped identities and their perceptions of Airmen.
- **Air Force training instructor and leader interviews:** Thirty-four technical training instructors (TTIs) and military training leaders (MTLs) provided perspectives on identity-focused training changes and their own Air Force identities.
- **Air Force technical trainee focus groups:** One hundred twenty-seven Air Force technical trainees from four career fields discussed their Air Force identities and training experiences.

Key Findings

- **Airman identity is present, while Airminded Warrior identity is less salient.** Perceptions expressed about Air Force service identities and characteristics suggest that technical trainees identify as Airmen more than with their specific career fields or as Airminded Warriors. TTIs and MTLs tend to identify more strongly with their career fields than with the broader Air Force, though they still convey the importance of the service's mission.

¹ PACER FORGE is an acronym for Primary Agile Combat Employment Range, Forward Operational Readiness Generation Exercise.

- **Perceptions of the Air Force are mixed but distinct.** Sister-service and Air Force participants seem to associate the Air Force with a higher quality of life than that in sister services, as well as strong technical competence, innovative problem-solving, and independent thinking. Some also noted that these characteristics might not always align with traditional expectations of the profession of arms, particularly those emphasizing shared physical hardship.
- **Identity develops through multiple, reinforcing mechanisms rather than a single approach.** Table S.1 summarizes findings on lessons learned from sister services’ identity development and highlights how these can be applied within the Air Force.

Table S.1. Summary of Findings: Instilling Identity

Framework Pillar	Key Strategy	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Tell	Set clear expectations	The Air Force communicates expectations clearly, but shifts in ideas and terminology can cause confusion.
	Emphasize service history and lineage	Although some instructors reference history, widespread efforts to harness history to cultivate service culture remain limited.
	Share personal stories and lessons learned	Instructors share challenges and lessons to motivate trainees and provide context for specific career fields.
	Connect roles to mission success	The Air Force has made progress, but routinely linking roles outside a specific career field to the mission remains a challenge.
Show	Shape the physical environment	The Air Force’s physical training environment should reflect a broader identity tied to airpower and be regularly updated.
	Symbolize identity through uniform and insignia	Members take pride in uniforms, but opinions vary: OCPs are viewed positively, and dress blues are viewed negatively.
	Model the standard	Instructors model service well, but inconsistent appearance standards can undermine initial teachings.
Do	Build habits, routines, and discipline	Trainees recognize the importance of daily routines but see inconsistency in standards that makes some seem optional.
	Embrace mission-related challenges	The Air Force has made progress with PACER FORGE Provisional, but further improvements are needed.
	Recognize achievements and milestones	Trainees appreciate milestone ceremonies in BMT, but similar opportunities appear to be lacking in technical training.

NOTE: OCP = operational camouflage pattern.

Recommendations

We provide three recommendations to strengthen identity among Airmen:

1. Implement lessons from sister services to strengthen identity development.

- a. Emphasize Air Force history and lineage.
 - b. Consistently model and enforce appearance standards.
 - c. Improve recognition of achievements and milestones, and explore redesign of the dress blues uniform.
2. Further invest in the PACER FORGE construct.
 - a. Expand meaningful responsibilities for all trainees.
 - b. Prioritize Air Force–unique mission demands.
 - c. Evaluate effectiveness, and monitor future changes.
 3. Clarify and communicate the Airminded Warrior concept.
 - a. Further define the problem and desired outcomes.
 - b. Develop clearer definitions of key identity concepts.
 - c. Communicate why these concepts matter.

Contents

- About This Report..... iii
- Summary v
- Figures and Tables x
- CHAPTER 1..... 1**
- Introduction 1
 - Motivation for This Project 2
 - Our Approach..... 4
 - Structure of This Report..... 7
- CHAPTER 2..... 8**
- Perceptions of Air Force Identities and Characteristics 8
 - Airman and Airminded Warrior Identities 9
 - Relationship Between Air Force Functions and the Mission 10
 - Perceived Importance of Different Identities 10
 - Perceived Characteristics of the Air Force 13
 - Conclusion..... 15
- CHAPTER 3..... 16**
- Deliberately Forming Identity: Insights from Sister Services and the Air Force’s Current Practices 16
 - Tell: Communicate Identity by Providing Orientation and Meaning..... 17
 - Show: Make Identity Visible Through Tangible Representations and Examples 20
 - Do: Build Identity Through Shared Practice and Action..... 22
 - Conclusion..... 26
- CHAPTER 4..... 27**
- Recommendations 27
 - Recommendation 1: Implement Lessons Learned from the Sister Services to Improve How the Air Force Builds Service Identity 29
 - Recommendation 2: Further Invest in the PACER FORGE Construct to Enhance Its Effectiveness 35
 - Recommendation 3: Clarify and Communicate the Broader Context for Airminded Warrior Identity Development..... 37
 - Conclusion..... 40
- APPENDIX A..... 41**
- Methods..... 41
 - Literature Review 41
 - Qualitative Methods 41
- APPENDIX B..... 50**
- Literature on the Fundamentals of Identity 50
 - Why Is Identity Important? Identity Shapes How People Think, Feel, and Act at Work 51
 - What Is Identity? Identity Is the Answer to “Who Am I?” 52

Where and When Does Identity Change? Identity Is Most Likely to Change During Transitions.....	55
Who Shapes Identity? The Organization and the Individual Shape Identity	56
How Does Identity Form? Identity Formation Is a Process	56
Summary	59
APPENDIX C.....	60
Additional Qualitative Findings on Identity-Formation Practices Within the Sister Services and Air Force ...	60
Tell: Communicate Identity by Providing Orientation and Meaning.....	61
Show: Make Identity Visible Through Tangible Representations and Examples	70
Do: Build Identity Through Shared Practice and Action.....	78
APPENDIX D	88
Observations and Insights About PACER FORGE Provisional	88
Approach	88
History of PACER FORGE	88
Program Description and Priorities.....	89
Insights from On-Site Observations.....	90
Insights from Semistructured Interviews and Focus Groups	91
Conclusion.....	93
Abbreviations	94
References.....	95

Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 2.1. Air Force Interview Participants’ Importance Ratings for Identities 12

Figure B.1. The Complex Nature of Identity 53

Figure B.2. When Identity Is Most Likely to Change 55

Figure B.3. A Simplified Process of Identity Formation 56

Tables

Table S.1. Summary of Findings: Instilling Identity vi

Table 1.1. Overview of Interview and Focus Group Participants 5

Table 2.1. Key Findings on Perceptions of Air Force Identities and Characteristics 8

Table 2.2. Training Instructor and Leader Rankings of Identity Importance Ranking 11

Table 3.1. Instilling Identity: A Three-Pillar Framework (Tell–Show–Do) for Organizations 16

Table 3.2. The Tell Pillar: Key Strategies 17

Table 3.3. The Show Pillar: Key Strategies 20

Table 3.4. The Do Pillar: Key Strategies 23

Table 4.1. Summary of Recommendations Mapped onto the Tell–Show–Do Framework 27

Table 4.2. An Example Approach to Project Old School 31

Table 4.3. Steps for Aligning Airminded Warrior Identity with Broader Air Force Goals 39

Table A.1. Overview of Interview and Focus Group Participants 42

Table A.2. Years Since Sister-Service Participants Had Left Military Service 42

Table A.3. Number of Sister-Service Interviewees, by Service and Personnel Category 43

Table A.4. Technical Training Instructor Interviewee Career Fields 44

Table A.5. Technical Trainee Focus Group Characteristics 45

Table A.6. Verbatim Descriptions Included in the Prompt for Muse QDA 47

Table A.7. Percentage of Human and Artificial Intelligence Agreement for Sister-Service Interview
Codebook 49

Table B.1. The 5Ws + H of Professional Identity 50

Table B.2. Positive Work and Individual Impacts of Having a Strong Professional Identity 52

Table B.3. Approaches That Can Be Applied to the Air Force 58

Table C.1. Instilling Identity: A Three-Pillar Framework (Tell–Show–Do) for Organizations 60

Table C.2. The Tell Pillar: Key Strategies 62

Table C.3. The Show Pillar: Key Strategies 71

Table C.4. The Do Pillar: Key Strategies 79

Introduction

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is making significant changes in how it prepares for the emerging threat environment, such as increasing its pace of modernization efforts and enhancing its recruiting, training, and support systems for U.S. Air Force personnel and their families.² As part of these changes, Air Education and Training Command is pursuing several lines of effort, including one focused on a priority of U.S. Department of War leadership to “revive the warrior ethos,”³ which focuses on creating a foundational warrior ethos and mindset among Air Force personnel, or *Airmen*. To that end, the command plans to develop *Airminded Warriors*—Airmen who have a deep understanding of the Air Force’s mission and embrace the Air Force’s core values and a warrior ethos.⁴

As part of its oversight of BMT and technical training, Second Air Force (2AF) is implementing changes to strengthen Airmen’s service identity early in their careers. As 2AF implements these changes, the commander asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to support two objectives:

- Examine how the Air Force’s sister services (the Army, the Coast Guard, the Marine Corps, and the Navy)⁵ build strong service identities and identify lessons learned from sister services’ efforts.
- Recommend how the Air Force can apply those lessons to strengthen its own identity in Airmen.

To support these two objectives, we addressed the following questions:

- How do organizations build identities aligned with their missions and cultures?
- What strategies have sister services used to build strong identities among their service members, particularly when one is new to the service (i.e., during initial training)?
- How do the sister services’ strategies map onto strategies that the Air Force already uses to develop Air Force service identity in initial training?
- What lessons can be applied from the sister services that would help the Air Force strengthen its efforts to develop Air Force service identity?

² Wes Shinego, “Air, Space Force Leaders Stress Modernization, Readiness,” U.S. Department of Defense, May 20, 2025.

³ Pete Hegseth, “Secretary Hegseth’s Message to the Force,” press release, U.S. Department of Defense, January 25, 2025a. The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

⁴ The findings and recommendations in this report reflect work completed between January and September 2025. Since delivery of the draft report to the Air Force, the service has continued to make significant revisions to Basic Military Training (BMT). To the extent possible, we have updated our language to reflect these changes (e.g., changing *warfighter* to *warrior*) and updated our recommendations so that they continue to be relevant while BMT changes continue.

⁵ Because the U.S. Space Force is a new service and is still evolving how it develops its personnel (Guardians), we did not include it in our examination of sister services’ efforts to instill service identities.

Motivation for This Project

Before applying lessons from the sister services to the Air Force, it is important to understand why Air Force leaders seek to develop Air-minded Warriors. This section summarizes the foundational concepts underlying Airman identity and senior leadership's emphasis on a mission-over-function mindset.

Air Force Mission, Vision, and the Airman's Creed Provide Foundation for Airman Identity

The Air Force describes its mission as “fly, fight and win—airpower anytime, anywhere.”⁶ The Air Force vision statement provides context for this mission:

The U.S. Air Force is the world's preeminent force in air, space and cyberspace. We maintain that distinction by maintaining our objective of global vigilance, reach and power and remaining true to our vision statement: The World's Greatest Air Force—Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation. Through shared values, key capabilities and upholding our Airman's Creed, we continue to achieve our mission and aim high in all we do.⁷

This foundation rests on the Air Force's core values—“Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do”⁸—and on the Airman's Creed,⁹ which articulates the Airman identity:

I AM AN AMERICAN AIRMAN.

I AM A WARRIOR.

I HAVE ANSWERED MY NATION'S CALL. I AM AN AMERICAN AIRMAN.

MY MISSION IS TO FLY, FIGHT, AND WIN.

I AM FAITHFUL TO A PROUD HERITAGE,

A TRADITION OF HONOR,

AND A LEGACY OF VALOR. I AM AN AMERICAN AIRMAN.

GUARDIAN OF FREEDOM AND JUSTICE,

MY NATION'S SWORD AND SHIELD,

ITS SENTRY AND AVENGER.

I DEFEND MY COUNTRY WITH MY LIFE. I AM AN AMERICAN AIRMAN.

⁶ U.S. Air Force, “We Do the Impossible Every Day,” webpage, undated-b.

⁷ U.S. Air Force, “Vision: It's Our Promise to Protect,” webpage, undated-a.

⁸ U.S. Air Force, *America's Air Force: A Profession of Arms*, July 2015, p. 5.

⁹ U.S. Air Force, undated-a.

WINGMAN, LEADER, WARRIOR.
I WILL NEVER LEAVE AN AIRMAN BEHIND,
I WILL NEVER FALTER,
AND I WILL NOT FAIL.

Together, these roles form the conceptual basis of the Airminded Warrior—an Airman who embodies a warrior ethos, supports fellow Airmen, and leads in service of the Air Force mission.

Mission over Function and Multi-Capable Airmen

When BMT changes began in earnest in 2024, DAF leadership promoted the concept of mission over function.¹⁰ In the context of Airman development, *mission over function* referred to cultivating a mindset that prioritizes mission success over an allegiance to a *functional community* (which typically refers to one’s Air Force career field).¹¹ Although current DAF leaders do not use the phrase *mission over function*, they continue the DAF’s emphasis on a mission-first (versus function-first) focus. A part of this focus is developing *Multi-Capable Airmen*—those who receive “training outside of their primary Air Force Specialty Code to ensure the flexibility required for distributed operations and agile combat employment.”¹² The Airminded Warrior identity, which embodies Air Force core values, a warrior ethos, and emphasis on the Air Force mission (*airmindedness*),¹³ can be viewed as the foundational identity for Multi-Capable Airmen.

Air Force Cultural Origins Provide Context for the Challenge of Developing a Unified Identity in Its Airmen

Each military service’s culture reflects its origins. The Air Force emerged from World War II, when the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) demonstrated the decisive role of airpower, and became an independent service in 1947.¹⁴ This origin in airpower and autonomy was accompanied by a period of

¹⁰ David W. Allvin, chief of staff, U.S. Air Force, “CSAF 23 Letter to Airmen: Following Through,” April 15, 2024.

¹¹ DAF, *The Case for Change: Optimizing the Air Force for Great Power Competition*, circa 2024, p. 8.

¹² Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, “Update on Recent DAF Efforts,” press release, December 2, 2025.

¹³ Like *warrior ethos*, the term *airmindedness* is not clearly defined in Air Force doctrine or guidance. 2AF has offered this working definition:

Airmindedness is the deep understanding Airmen and Guardians possess of their role in the Department of the Air Force mission to fly, fight, and win . . . airpower anytime, anywhere. Airmen are responsible for Defending, Operating, Generating, and Sustaining [DOGS] Air and Space Power at airbases, space bases, and forward operating bases to defeat the adversary. (2AF, “Mission Analysis: Airminded Warfighter Skills Development,” slide deck, May 26, 2025)

¹⁴ The stage was set for the Air Force before World War II. In 1918, the United Kingdom’s Royal Air Force became an independent service. For more on the Air Force’s origin, see Robert Farley, “US Air Force Culture, 1947–2017,” in Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Culture of Military Organizations*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

rapid advances in aircraft technology; technology and innovation have remained core facets of Air Force culture and its function-oriented structure.¹⁵

Although this heritage provides a strong cultural throughline, the Air Force has sometimes lacked a “unique cultural narrative” that resonates equally across operational and support roles.¹⁶ As a result, Airmen may identify more strongly with their specific career fields than with the broader Airman identity. Senior leaders aim to reverse this tendency by emphasizing that Airmen should see themselves first as members of the Air Force—for example, “I’m an Airman first, and I’m also an F-16 maintainer”—while also reinforcing a shared warrior ethos.

The Challenge: Balancing Airman Identities

The challenge that Air Force leaders face is how to balance an Air-minded Warrior identity with a functional or career-field identity among Airmen. Leaning too far in one direction can create problems. Research suggests that overemphasis on a career-field (occupational) identity can be associated with lower productivity, reduced adherence to policy, and more resistance to change.¹⁷ However, someone can experience stress and leave an organization if their organizational (e.g., service) identity comes into conflict with their existing occupational or work-role identity.¹⁸ Both identities can benefit the Air Force if they are deliberately aligned. Determining the appropriate balance is therefore central to achieving the Air Force’s identity-related objectives.

Our Approach

Our approach was qualitative, involving literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, and observations. We briefly describe each approach here, with more details in Appendix A.

¹⁵ See Farley (2019) for more discussion on technological innovation as a facet of Air Force culture. An example of Air Force structural alignments to technological capabilities is the service’s move away from Army occupational codes (which it had from the USAAF days) to build its own occupational structure of Air Force specialty codes (AFSCs) in the 1950s. At that time, Air Force leadership did not believe that the Army occupational codes adequately covered the technical nature of many Air Force jobs. For a discussion of the history of Air Force occupational structure, see Maria C. Lytell, Sean Robson, John A. Ausink, Barbara A. Bicksler, Grace Falgoust, Chaitra M. Hardison, Devon Hill, Annie Yu Kleiman, and Mark Toukan, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Air Force Enlisted Skills Management System: Recommended Changes to Meet Future Demands*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2323-1, 2024.

¹⁶ A 2012 review of the Air Force’s historical cultural narratives argued that a unified narrative has eluded the Air Force and settled on a narrative of “over not through,” which emphasizes innovation as the core unifying concept for the Air Force. For more on this narrative review, see Paula G. Thornhill, “Over Not Through”: *The Search for a Strong, Unified Culture for America’s Airmen*, RAND Corporation, OP-386-AF, October 2012.

¹⁷ David R. Hekman, H. Kevin Steensma, Gregory A. Bigley, and James F. Hereford, “Effects of Organizational and Professional Identification on the Relationship Between Administrators’ Social Influence and Professional Employees’ Adoption of New Work Behavior,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 94, No. 5, September 2009; David R. Hekman, Gregory A. Bigley, H. Kevin Steensma, and James F. Hereford, “Combined Effects of Organizational and Professional Identification on the Reciprocity Dynamic for Professional Employees,” *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 3, June 2009.

¹⁸ Kathryn Ostermeier, Peter Anzollitto, Danielle Cooper, and Julie Hancock, “When Identities Collide: Organizational and Professional Identity Conflict and Employee Outcomes,” *Management Decision*, Vol. 61, No. 9, August 24, 2023.

Literature Review

We conducted a literature review of peer-reviewed scientific publications, gray literature, and government publications to establish a baseline understanding of how identities form and how organizations deliberately shape professional identities. Sources spanned several disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication studies, organizational management). Our synthesis informed how we conceptualized identity development and supported design of our Tell–Show–Do framework, with specific attention to military applications. See Appendix B for additional details.

Interviews and Focus Groups

We conducted semistructured discussions with personnel from the sister services and the Air Force (see Table 1.1). Sister-service interviews with RAND personnel and Army fellows at RAND focused on how other services build service identity.¹⁹ Sixty percent of these participants were either still affiliated with the military or had left the service within the preceding ten years.²⁰

Table 1.1. Overview of Interview and Focus Group Participants

Service	Time Frame	Type of Participant	Data Collection Method	Number of Participants
Sister service	May–June 2025	RAND employee ^a	Interviews (virtual)	45
		Army fellow at RAND	Interviews (virtual)	5 ^b
Air Force	July 2025	TTI	Interviews (virtual and in person)	29
		MTL	Interviews (virtual)	5
		Technical trainee	Focus groups (in person)	127
Total				211

NOTE: MTL = military training leader; TTI = technical training instructor.

^a Most of these RAND employees are former service members; 11 were still serving in the National Guard or one of the reserves.

^b Because our team was already on-site in San Antonio in July 2025 for the trainee focus groups, we were able to conduct five on-site interviews with TTIs and MTLs.

¹⁹ We also intended to interview current service members in the sister services but faced significant delays in DAF approvals. Instead, we acquired information about current sister-service efforts to instill identity by reviewing publicly available information (e.g., basic training websites) and information provided by our sponsor's office, which participates in the Council on Recruit Basic Training. This is a Department of War council with membership from all military services (including the U.S. Coast Guard) with the goal of sharing ideas and lessons learned to improve enlisted basic and technical training programs across the services.

Two points are important to note about the sister-service interview participants. First, many were commissioned officers, meaning that their perspectives more closely reflect officer experiences than enlisted ones. Second, as RAND staff and fellows, participants generally bring advanced education and experience in policy analysis, which can shape how they reflect on military service and identity. At the same time, we believe that this analytical orientation contributed positively to the study because participants were often willing to critically examine their experiences and articulate why particular practices and norms mattered for identity formation.

²⁰ See Table A.2 in Appendix A for a more detailed breakdown of years since service for this sample.

Next, we conducted interviews with Air Force training leaders and instructors to understand current identity-building practices during BMT and technical training. Finally, we conducted focus groups with Airmen in technical training from four career fields (Aircrew Operations, Materiel Management, Security Forces, and Special Warfare) to learn how Airmen perceive their identities and training experiences.

Data Analysis

The analysis of interview and focus group transcripts was assisted by Muse QDA, a RAND-developed, artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled qualitative analysis tool to accelerate initial coding and synthesis. We reviewed all outputs and conducted manual coding on a subset of transcripts to ensure analytic fidelity. Detailed procedures are described in Appendix A, and in-depth findings, including extensive supporting quotes, for the Tell-Show-Do framework are provided in Appendix C.

Observation of PACER FORGE Provisional

Three team members observed one full iteration of Primary Agile Combat Employment Range, Forward Operational Readiness Generation Exercise (PACER FORGE) Provisional during an on-site visit to Lackland Air Force Base in June 2025. PACER FORGE Provisional is the culminating event at BMT but is still undergoing revision (hence *Provisional*).²¹ Observations were supplemented by document review and discussions with leadership and cadre from the 319th Training Squadron (TRS), which oversees PACER FORGE. We focused on learning about the intent behind the overall concept and specific events; how the events were executed (including trainee experiences); and how the cadre was trained and interacted with trainees, as well as the cadre's insights on effective practices and planned improvements. Appendix D provides consolidated insights specific to PACER FORGE Provisional, drawing from interviews, focus groups, and our observations.

Important Considerations About Our Approach

Because Air Force culture and identity are broad topics, we scoped this project to focus on organizational initiatives within initial training, which is consistent with the sponsor's span of authority.²² Although identity development continues throughout an Airman's career, our findings and recommendations emphasize BMT and technical training under 2AF.

²¹ PACER FORGE Provisional is a three-day, two-night "scenario-based deployment exercise" in the sixth week of BMT meant to "cultivate an Air-minded Warfighter mindset with a laser focus on readiness, lethality, and warfighting." See 37th Training Wing Public Affairs, Air Education and Training Command, U.S. Air Force, "A New Chapter in Readiness: PACER FORGE Provisional," March 10, 2025.

²² In the organizational behavior literature, this process is commonly referred to as *newcomer socialization*. For additional discussion, see Blake E. Ashforth, David M. Sluss, and Alan M. Saks, "Socialization Tactics, Proactive Behavior, and Newcomer Learning: Integrating Socialization Models," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, No. 3, June 2007.

We acknowledge that the terminology related to Air Force culture and identity is evolving. Although we provide definitions when we introduce terms (e.g., *warrior ethos*), we did not conduct a formal review of all the ways in which these terms can or should be defined. Instead, we focused on pinpointing effective identity-building strategies, recognizing that the Air Force is the entity that is best positioned to define and refine identity concepts over time.

Finally, most of our interviewees from the sister services were veterans. Although we specifically inquired about early training, many veterans shared valuable insights from their broader military experiences. Consequently, some insights are directly applicable to the early socialization period, whereas others are more relevant to later stages. In contrast, most of our Air Force interviewees were TTIs and trainees, and we focused mainly on the initial training context (BMT and technical training). Although these perspectives can differ, the sister-service findings offer a rich and diverse source of information, reflecting how identities are influenced by different points in time in a career.

Structure of This Report

The rest of this report has the following structure:

- Chapter 2 presents findings from our Air Force and sister-service participants' perceptions of Air Force identities and characteristics.
- Chapter 3 compares sister services' strategies for instilling service identities during initial training and recent Air Force identity-building strategies in BMT and technical training.
- Chapter 4 provides our project's recommendations.

The report also includes four appendixes: our methods (Appendix A), a literature review on identity fundamentals (Appendix B), detailed qualitative findings on identity-building strategies (Appendix C), and insights into PACER FORGE Provisional (Appendix D).

Perceptions of Air Force Identities and Characteristics

In this chapter, we examine how Air Force service identity is perceived by TTIs, MTLs, and technical trainees and how perceived characteristics of the service might influence identity formation during initial training. We summarize key findings from this chapter in Table 2.1 and provide supporting evidence and insights in the sections that follow.

Table 2.1. Key Findings on Perceptions of Air Force Identities and Characteristics

Topic	Key Findings
Airman and Airminded Warrior identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air Force training instructors, leaders, and technical trainees described Airman identity as embracing Air Force core values and the broader Air Force mission, as well as serving the country. • <i>Airminded Warrior</i> was not a commonly known term among TTIs, MTLs, and technical trainees. • Training instructors and trainees were split on whether the warrior identity applies to all Airmen. Some expressed concern that it could suggest the contributions of Airmen in support functions are not as important to the mission as those in operational positions.
Relationship between Air Force functions and the mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical trainees could describe the value that different functions bring to the mission, but some trainees expressed not feeling strongly connected to the mission because they had not contributed to it yet. • TTIs suggested that it is normal for trainees not to feel strongly connected to the broader mission yet because that connection develops with time and experience; however, this messaging could also weaken trainees' sense of Airman identity during training.
Perceived importance of different identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical trainees said that their Airman identity was more important to them than their career-field identity. • TTIs and MTLs, however, said that they identified more strongly with their career fields than with an Air Force service identity. We do not know whether this is a problem, given that training instructors emphasize Air Force (service) identity to trainees. • Sister-service interviewees identified trade-offs of strong service identities. For example, a benefit is higher morale, but a risk is insularity among members. • TTIs and MTLs described trade-offs of strong occupational identities. For example, a benefit is fostering technical skill development, but a risk is less understanding of the Air Force mission.
Perceived characteristics of the Air Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived characteristics of the Air Force included higher quality of life (than that in sister services), technical competence, innovative problem-solving, and independent thinking. • Some sister-service participants expressed a downside to these characteristics: overemphasis on “creature comforts” and a “corporate culture.” • Enduring perceptions about Air Force characteristics as an “employer” could affect what new recruits expect and, in turn, how they develop their Air Force identities.

Drawing on interviews and focus groups, we assessed how Airmen understand what it means to be an Airman or an Air-minded Warrior, how they connect their roles to the broader mission, and how they prioritize their service and occupational identities. We also assessed how sister-service veterans' perceptions of the Air Force shaped their expectations about the Air Force.

Airman and Air-minded Warrior Identities

Participants generally described being an Airman in terms of the Air Force core values and the mission. Core values were often cited explicitly, and participants also said that they associated being an Airman with such characteristics as teamwork and service to others (often described as being a *wingman*). Some participants mentioned being part of a legacy, problem-solving, or making a positive difference. A common refrain was serving the country and contribution to the Air Force mission, as reflected in participants' emphasis on purpose and mission accomplishment.

When asked about the term *Air-minded Warfighter*,²³ few participants seemed familiar with the specific label, although many referenced related concepts, such as *warrior ethos*. Some said that they viewed warfighting as inherent to being an Airman, defining it broadly as executing one's role in support of the mission, regardless of career field:

It's not carrying a gun out to battle. It's just executing your specific mission. If you're finance, if you're services—everybody has a part to play in the grand scheme of things. So, to be a warfighter in the Air Force is to complete the mission and do your job. . . . If you're an Airman, you have to be an Air-minded Warfighter.—TTI

Others, however, distinguished between Airmen who support the mission and those who directly engage in combat, arguing that the term *warfighter* should apply to only a subset of Airmen.

Obviously, to put people in the air, you need to have people that are supplying them, coordinating everything, making sure the mission is possible to carry out. And the majority of the people are going to be supportive. If you're calling a person a *warfighter*, that term has to mean something. But if you're a warfighter, you're actually fighting. You're actually facing the enemy.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Some participants expressed concern that the term *Air-minded Warfighter* could unintentionally signal that contributions from Airmen in support roles are less significant to mission success than contributions from Airmen in operational roles:

When people say something like "Air-minded Warfighter," I feel like that puts too much emphasis on the front line or "tip of the spear," as people like to call it. And I feel like it downplays the significance of people who are not directly involved in the warfighting effort.—TTI

²³ During data collection, 2AF used the term *Air-minded Warfighter*; subsequent guidance has adopted the term *Air-minded Warrior*.

Relationship Between Air Force Functions and the Mission

As noted in Chapter 1, the Air Force’s mission is to “fly, fight and win—airpower anytime, anywhere.”²⁴ When asked about how their career fields relate to this mission, TTIs, MTLs, and technical trainees generally articulated how their occupations contribute to broader mission success. For example, Materiel Management trainees referenced the phrase “You can’t fly without supply” to convey the importance that logistics and supply chains have for Air Force missions.

Participants also highlighted the interdependence of Air Force roles:

When you hear “Air Force,” you hear “bombs,” you hear “planes,” you hear “aircrew”—the tip of the spear. But you forget that the reason those planes are flying . . . is because of the other personnel in the background. . . . It’s more of a collective whole You are also part of something bigger.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

These connections often reflected lessons emphasized during BMT, during which instructors use metaphors and examples to illustrate how different career fields enable mission execution. However, some trainees described dismissive attitudes toward certain career fields. For example, participants from Security Forces mentioned receiving such comments as “standing at the gate,” which they felt undervalued their broader role as defenders.

Although trainees could explain how different functions support the mission, some reported not yet feeling strongly connected to the Air Force mission. Several said that they expected that sense of connection to develop only after graduation and assignment to operational units. Instructors echoed this view, describing identity formation in training as foundational rather than complete:

To expect buy-in in seven to eight months . . . is unrealistic. We can provide as many opportunities, tools, and training as we can, which is great. I think we’re doing a lot of that. But it’s time. It’s service. It’s the experience of having mentors.—TTI

Although this messaging might help manage trainee expectations, it also risks trainees not fully seeing themselves as Airmen during training, which highlights a tension between “meeting trainees where they are” and fostering identity with the Air Force.

Perceived Importance of Different Identities

Because DAF leaders at the time had emphasized a mission-over-function mindset, we examined whether Air Force participants placed greater importance on their service identity (Airman) or occupational identity (career field). We first summarize the trainee perspectives, then instructor and leader perspectives, and conclude with identity trade-offs.

Technical Trainee Perspectives

When we asked trainees how they identify themselves in different scenarios, they emphasized different aspects of their identity depending on the situation. Trainees reported that, when interacting

²⁴ U.S. Air Force, undated-b.

with strangers, they limited personal details for security reasons. When comfortable, they were more likely to identify as members of the military or the Air Force, and, in military contexts, they might reference their career field. Overall, trainees did what would be expected: Highlight the identity relevant to the context.

When directly asked which identity mattered more, trainees generally prioritized the Airman identity over career-field identity. As one trainee explained,

When we say our creed, we say, “We’re American Airmen.” We don’t say we’re our AFSC. We’re American Airmen first no matter what. That’s just what we’re taught. It was engraved in our head during basic. Your job title comes second.—Trainee, Materiel Management

This messaging shift is also occurring in technical training. Several TTIs explained that they deliberately pushed this mentality during technical training. One TTI, who was a nurse, offered this example:

I always tell people, “You’re an officer in the Air Force, and your job is a nurse.”

Although it is too early to determine whether this messaging results in durable service identity, trainees seemed to be identifying more strongly with the Air Force than with their career fields at this stage.

Training Instructor and Leader Perspectives

We asked TTIs and MTLs to rank and rate the importance of three identities: military service member, Airman, and career-field member.²⁵ As shown in Table 2.2, instructors and leaders most often ranked career-field identity as their primary identity, followed by Airman identity, and then military identity.

Table 2.2. Training Instructor and Leader Rankings of Identity Importance Ranking

Identity	Ranked First	Ranked Second	Ranked Third
Career field	45% (14)	16% (5)	39% (12)
Airman	26% (8)	61% (19)	13% (4)
Military	29% (9)	23% (7)	48% (15)

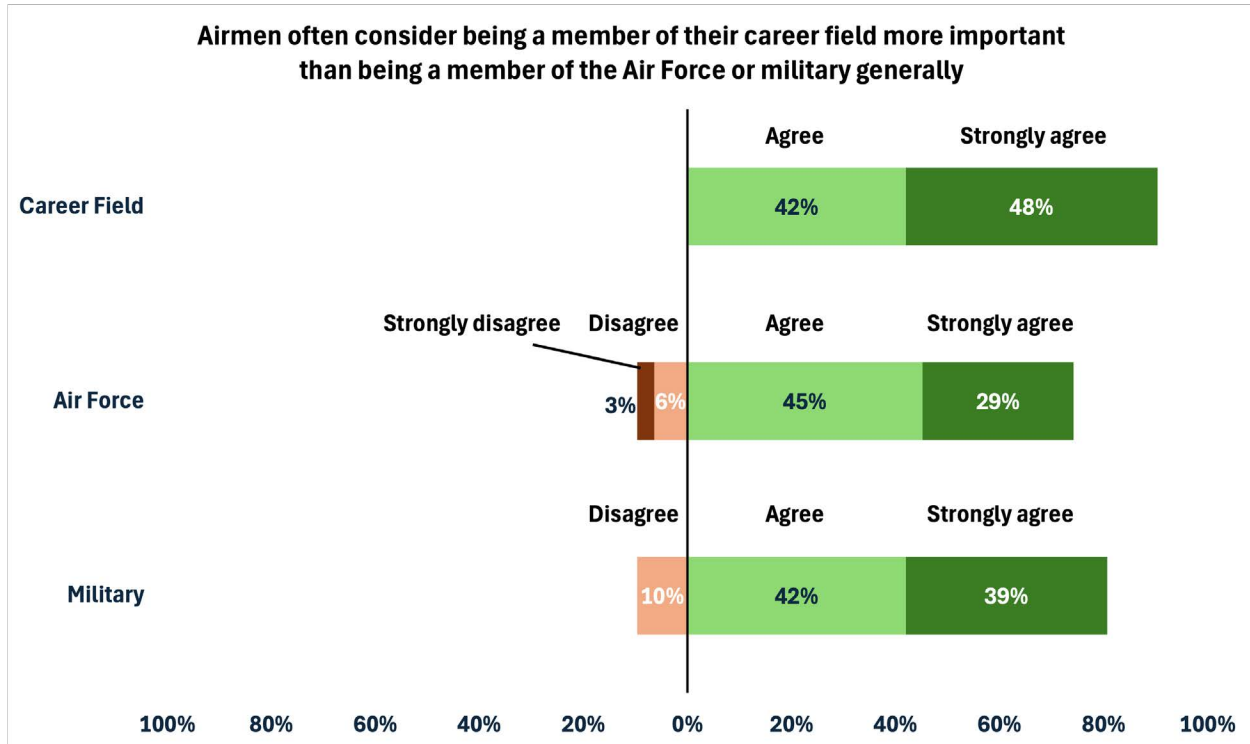
NOTE: The numbers in parentheses are numbers of participants; 31 participants answered this question. Bolded text reflects the highest percentage for that rank (i.e., highest percentage value in the column).

When participants were asked to rate identity importance, results were consistent (see Figure 2.1). Nearly all instructors reported that they agreed with the statement that their career field was an important part of how they see themselves, and no respondents reported disagreement. Air Force identity was rated as important by most, but it was also the only identity to elicit strong disagreement

²⁵ Given that technical trainees have not spent time in the broader Air Force, we did not ask them to provide more details on their occupational identities.

from some respondents. Military identity was rated slightly higher than Air Force identity, although both were less salient than career-field identity.

Figure 2.1. Air Force Interview Participants' Importance Ratings for Identities



NOTE: Because of rounding error, and not including neutral responses, not all percentages in a row will add up to 100 percent. For each identity, we read a statement and asked the interviewee to indicate whether they (1) strongly disagreed, (2) disagreed, (3) were neutral, (4) agreed, or (5) strongly agreed with the statement. The statements read, “I consider being in . . . (a) the military (i.e., a service member) an important part of how I see myself; (b) the Air Force (i.e., an Airman) an important part of how I see myself; (c) [career field (i.e., role)] an important part of how I see myself.”

These findings point to a potential disconnect between the identities emphasized by instructional cadre and DAF messaging that prioritizes service identity. However, instructors reported deliberately emphasizing Airman identity to trainees, so it is unclear whether this difference presents a practical issue.

Service and Occupational Identity Trade-Offs

Interviewees described benefits and potential risks associated with both strong identification with one’s service and strong identification with one’s occupation, which is consistent with findings in prior research.²⁶ Sister-service interviewees tended to focus on the trade-offs of strong service identities:

²⁶ Daan van Knippenberg and Els C. M. van Schie, “Foci and Correlates of Organizational Identification,” *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 73, No. 2, June 2000; Rolf van Dick, Daan van Knippenberg, Rudolf Kerschreiter, Guido Hertel, and Jan Wieseke, “Interactive Effects of Work Group and Organizational Identification on Job Satisfaction and Extra-

- benefits of strong service identity: greater morale and belonging; a sense of ownership, especially in leadership roles; a desire for continuous improvement; higher retention
- risks of overly strong service identity: increased insularity and rigidity; less ability to work with other services in joint settings.

Interviewees also described trade-offs of strong occupational identities. TTI and MTL interviewees highlighted these trade-offs:

- benefits of strong occupational identity: development of technical and leadership skills; job motivation and satisfaction; role cohesion
- risks of overly strong occupational identity: lack of focus or understanding of Air Force mission and objectives; lack of unity among Airmen; willingness to push back on changes that Air Force leaders want to make.

Perceived Characteristics of the Air Force

Recruits enter the Air Force with expectations shaped by the public image of the Air Force.²⁷ If those expectations diverge from actual experience, commitment to the service can weaken.²⁸ Understanding how the Air Force is perceived—as an employer and as a military service—can inform identity-building efforts during initial training.

To examine these perceptions, we drew on Air Force participants' explanations of why they joined the Air Force and on sister-service interviewees' views of Air Force personnel.²⁹ Sister-service perspectives were particularly useful for highlighting durable perceptions that could be difficult to change. Two overarching themes emerged:

- higher quality of life and care for personnel
- technical competence, innovative problem-solving, and independent thinking.

Role Behavior," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 72, No. 3, June 2008; Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, "The Dynamics of Organizational Identity," *Human Relations*, Vol. 55, No. 8, August 2002.

²⁷ In the branding literature, *image* is defined as the attributes that those outside the Air Force ascribe to the Air Force. These perceptions shape how outsiders perceive the Air Force and how the Air Force treats its members (Filip Lievens and Jerel E. Slaughter, "Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 3, 2016).

²⁸ An individual forms a *psychological contract* with their employer based on what they expect the employer will provide and what they think the employer expects they will offer in return (e.g., "my employer will provide meaningful project opportunities if I demonstrate I can perform well"). These expectations are not based on language in an employment contract but are formed by the person's interpretation of implied promises made by the employer through its messaging and behavior. Violations or breaches of psychological contracts can reduce commitment to the organization. For a review of psychological contracts, see Jacqueline A.-M. Coyle-Shapiro, Sandra Pereira Costa, Wiebke Doden, and Chiachi Chang, "Psychological Contracts: Past, Present, and Future," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 6, 2019.

²⁹ Interviewees generally focused on their experience when they were in the military; however, some also incorporated their experiences working at RAND with Air Force veterans. Our findings here focus on their perceptions from when they were serving in the military.

Quality of Life

Air Force participants frequently cited quality of life as a key reason for joining the Air Force, often based on advice from others.³⁰ Several described choosing the Air Force over another service because it offered similar career opportunities with better living conditions and family support. One TTI described the influence of others on the choice to join the Air Force:

Most of the people in the Army said to go to the Air Force . . . I was told it's a better quality of life, more educational opportunities, more leadership opportunities and more family friendly.

Sister-service interviewees echoed this perception, often describing the Air Force as being more attentive than other services to members' basic needs. However, some participants also suggested that this perceived characteristic of the Air Force could be overemphasized, particularly in deployment contexts. This gives the impression that the Air Force places less focus on physical hardship than other military services do. One Marine Corps veteran's comment illustrates this idea:

So, we're sleeping in the field, and they have hotel rooms. It was insane. If they ever got in the field, they'd have field showers and hot water, while I'm covered in grime and mud. That's crazy. The focus on creature comforts were [among] my strongest impressions.

Although it is unclear how such perceptions affect identity formation during initial training, they might influence how Airmen view themselves—and are viewed by others—in joint environments.

Technical Competence, Innovative Problem-Solving, and Independent Thinking

Across interviews, Air Force personnel were widely said to be technically capable, innovative, and encouraged to think independently. A Marine Corps veteran summarized this view as follows:

I think that, if you get the test scores from every branch, Air Force people are probably the smartest. Not only are they smart about their subject matter, but they are overall very smart. They have a different way of thinking. And that comes from the different expectations of them.

Air Force instructors similarly emphasized technical expertise and innovation as defining characteristics. At the same time, these traits were sometimes associated with a perception of a more “corporate” culture. An Army veteran described interactions with the Air Force this way:

³⁰ This sentiment is strongly supported by a prior RAND report focused exclusively on recruiting for Special Warfare (see Sean Robson, Tracy C. Krueger, Grace Falgoust, Alvin Moon, Jessie Wang, Lewis Schneider, Ryan Johnson, Beverly A. Weidmer, Anthony Adler, and Barbara Bicksler, *Recruiting for U.S. Air Force Special Warfare: A Review of Practices and Recommended Courses of Action*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2420-1, 2024). Specifically, quality of life emerged as one of three key differentiators between Air Force Special Warfare and the special operations communities of the other services. The other two differentiators were the mission—for Special Warfare, *mission* refers to the core capabilities of personnel recovery, precision strike, and global access—and the emphasis on quiet professionalism (i.e., limits self-promotion).

It just felt corporate . . . like an eight-hour workday. People showed up. They did what they wanted to do, and then they went on their own ways.—Army Veteran

Some participants linked this perception to the smaller proportion of Air Force roles involving direct combat, suggesting a tension between technical excellence and shared physical hardship, which is associated with warrior ethos.

Conclusion

Findings presented in this chapter suggest that Airman identity is widely recognized during initial training, although its meaning and salience vary across groups and contexts. Trainees generally said that they identified strongly as Airmen and can explain how their roles support the mission, even if many do not yet feel fully connected to it prior to operational service. In contrast, instructors and leaders tended to identify more strongly with their career fields, despite actively emphasizing service identity to trainees. At the same time, the Air-minded Warrior concept was not uniformly understood, and enduring perceptions of the Air Force—such as higher quality of life and strong technical competence—shape expectations and identity development. Chapter 3 builds on these findings by examining how identity can be more deliberately shaped through a Tell–Show–Do framework, drawing on lessons from sister services and current Air Force practices.

Deliberately Forming Identity: Insights from Sister Services and the Air Force’s Current Practices

Organizations deliberately shape new members’ identity through aligned messages, symbols, and shared experiences. Drawing on academic literature and interviews with sister-service members and Air Force personnel, we developed a Tell–Show–Do framework to synthesize evidence-based identity-building strategies in a practitioner-friendly format (Table 3.1). Although these strategies are not new, our framework provides a concise lens for assessing current Air Force practices during initial training.

Table 3.1. Instilling Identity: A Three-Pillar Framework (Tell–Show–Do) for Organizations

Pillar	Core Focus	Key Strategy
Tell	Communicate identity by providing orientation and meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear expectations. Emphasize service history and lineage. Share personal stories and lessons learned. Connect individual contributions to mission.
Show	Make identity visible through tangible representations and examples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shape the physical environment. Symbolize identity through uniform, insignia, and regalia. Model the standard.
Do	Build identity through shared practice and action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in daily routines, rituals, and discipline. Embrace mission-related challenges. Recognize achievements and milestones.

In this chapter, we use the Tell–Show–Do framework to assess how effectively the Air Force instills service identity during BMT and technical training. Although we discuss them separately, the pillars are mutually reinforcing: Tell without Show or Do becomes rhetoric, Show without Tell lacks meaning, and Do without Tell or Show leads to inconsistency in execution. Accordingly, this chapter provides a high-level assessment of current practices, with more-detailed analysis and illustrative examples available in Appendix C.

Tell: Communicate Identity by Providing Orientation and Meaning

The Tell pillar focuses on how organizations communicate expectations, history, narratives, and mission relevance to shape identity. Across the sister services, early training often emphasizes clear and consistent messaging to establish a shared understanding of standards, values, and conduct. In Table 3.2, we summarize these Tell strategies, identify lessons from sister services, and offer a qualitative assessment of Air Force strategies. We describe key observations about each strategy in the discussion following the table.

Table 3.2. The Tell Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lesson from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Set clear expectations	Communicate expectations directly and consistently—both spoken and in writing—to foster a shared view of ethos, history, standards, terminology, ranks, roles, customs, and rules.	Across services, early training prioritizes the communication of general expectations and values to lay the foundation for appropriate conduct.	BMT conveys essential values, rules, standards, and expected conduct. ✓ Changes in terminology and appearance standards cause confusion and reduce buy-in. !
Emphasize service history and lineage	Tell stories of key events and traditions—past and present—that have shaped the organization’s identity, emphasizing the significance of collective achievements and challenges to inspire.	History typically plays an outsize role; facts, traditions, stories, etc. are routinely used to root members in their lineage, build pride, and instill deep purpose.	Although a few instructors and communities incorporate history, widespread efforts to harness history as a tool for cultivating an emotional connection to the service remain limited. !
Share personal stories and lessons learned	Encourage the sharing of personal stories that illustrate key concepts, including both successes and lessons learned from mistakes, to make identity more relatable and accessible.	Firsthand accounts are exchanged across the services to exemplify concepts and encourage each member to find their “why,” fostering trust and belonging.	Instructors share common challenges, lessons learned, and growth opportunities to illustrate the underlying reason behind actions and decisions, reinforcing a collective identity. ✓
Connect roles to mission success	Explain how different roles contribute to the overall mission, helping individuals see their place in the larger enterprise and emphasizing the importance of collaboration.	Although making this link explicit and personalized is considered important in some services (e.g., Coast Guard), it was not as heavily discussed as other strategies.	Training introduces the importance of all roles with focus on how career field contributes to the mission. ✓ Fully embracing an “enterprise-level understanding” appears to be challenging. !

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention.

Key Observations

Basic Military Training Clearly Conveys Essential Values, Rules, Standards, and Expected Conduct

Across interviews, instructors and trainees consistently reported that BMT clearly communicates Air Force values, rules, and expected conduct. This early emphasis helps establish a foundational Airman identity and signals the standards associated with military service. Instructors, in particular, highlighted the role of structure and accountability in setting expectations for behavior and professionalism:

BMT does a fairly good job introducing them to that Air Force culture and structure because structure is the core part that they need to maintain even while they go through our pipeline here.—TTI

Inconsistency in Terminology and Appearance Standards Causes Confusion and Reduces Buy-In

Despite this strong baseline, instructors frequently expressed frustration with shifting identity labels and changes to appearance standards.³¹ These changes were described as diluting the clarity of messaging over time and making it more difficult for trainees (and instructors) to distinguish enduring expectations from temporary priorities:

I understand that change happens. Things will progress, but there's some stuff that changes all the time. How are we supposed to maintain consistency in standards whenever they keep flopping back and forth? How are you establishing identity if the core of it all, the foundation of it all, changes all the time?—TTI

Current Use of Service History Undermines Emotional Connection

In contrast to sister services—whose history and lineage are often used to help members feel like they are part of a shared story—the Air Force presents history in BMT and technical training, but it is not consistently conveyed in ways that foster emotional connection.³² Several trainees reported difficulty forming a personal connection to Air Force symbols, values, and traditions because they were not reliably linked to compelling historical narratives that explain why those elements matter and how they connect present-day Airmen to those who came before them:

It's the meaning behind these words and symbols, but whenever you get here, it's like, "This circle means one team, one fight. This star means excellence in all we do. These three things are our core values." But who wrote that? Who decided that? It's not inspiring. It's not genuine.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

³¹ This is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

³² Service history and lineage showcase the military's legacy, but those stories can sometimes feel intimidating because they are often extraordinary.

Instructors Use Personal Stories and Lessons Learned to Reinforce Meaning and Belonging

Across interviews, experience-based narratives (i.e., storytelling or sensegiving³³) emerged as an effective mechanism for communicating expectations and reinforcing service identity, and Air Force instructors appeared to be using this approach effectively. Instructors described routinely sharing personal experiences, challenges, and lessons learned to explain the reasoning behind standards and procedures. Trainees noted that these stories made expectations feel credible and meaningful by linking routine actions to real mission outcomes:

I think learning about what our instructors have gone through—hearing that right from the person who’s seen it themselves—it makes your heart feel a little different than if you just read in a book.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Airmen Understand Their Roles but Not Always Their Mission Impact

Although trainees are introduced to the idea that all roles contribute to mission success, instructors and trainees described this connection as largely abstract. Technical trainees can typically explain the importance of their own career field but often seem to lack an enterprise-level understanding of how roles interact to enable specific missions. Several instructors noted that, without visibility into the operational context, messages about “how everyone matters” can feel generic or unconvincing—particularly for Airmen whose work is distant from mission execution. This dynamic raises questions about how much cross-career-field understanding is appropriate during technical training and how mission context can be conveyed in ways that feel concrete rather than symbolic:

The common complaint for the majority of people I know in the Air Force who are outside of my kind of community [Special Warfare] is that they don’t really feel that useful. They don’t know what’s going on. For example, I have a lot of maintenance buddies, and they would just generate aircraft all day, every day. They had no idea what the mission was that the aircraft was going on. They didn’t know the context of why they’re doing it. They have no concept because no one tells them how they’re actually contributing. They’re just patted on the back and told that they’re doing great. I don’t know if they’re feeling that connection or they feel it’s like patronizing where their role is overexaggerated to the point where they’re like, “Yes, I don’t believe anything you say.”—TTI

³³ See Appendix B for additional discussion of the role and importance of sensegiving in organizations. Narrative theory is one possible explanation for the value of storytelling. Narrative theory argues that people’s identities are based on the stories they tell about themselves. People make meaning of their past experiences and come to conclusions about who they are when they share stories with others in the same group (e.g., unit, career field, installation, service branch). This process of building identity is not limited to individual stories. People also tell stories about the groups they are a part of, which gives meaning to the group’s history and purpose and reinforces group identity (in other words, “who we are”). See Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, “Narrative Identity,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, No. 3, June 2013.

Show: Make Identity Visible Through Tangible Representations and Examples

The Show pillar reinforces identity through observable cues, such as physical environment, uniforms and insignia, and leader behavior (see Table 3.3). These strategies signal what the organization values and shape identity through everyday observation rather than formal instruction.

Table 3.3. The Show Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lesson from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Shape the physical environment	Use all spaces—training facilities, barracks, dining halls, and common areas—to emphasize history, values, and guidance, demonstrating discipline and care through maintained environments.	Consistently emphasized, everyday spaces exert a visual influence and require deliberate design, upkeep, and alignment with values and needs.	The training environment generally fosters pride and motivation through visual representations. ✓
			Focus is often on career fields rather than on the Air Force identity and airpower. !
Symbolize identity through uniform and insignia	Encourage the visible display of identity, tradition, and belonging by having members wear distinctive attire, badges, and honors—each symbolizing pride, discipline, and achievements.	Uniforms and insignia are invaluable, symbolizing identity and pride while reflecting service members' commitment and fostering a strong sense of belonging.	Members take great pride in their uniforms; OCPs are largely regarded positively. ✓
			Dress blues receive criticism for resembling business attire and lacking uniqueness. !
Model the standard	Ensure that those in authority visibly embody appropriate conduct, reinforcing excellence and authenticity, so junior personnel understand, “this is how it’s done here.”	Although making this link explicit and personalized is considered important in some services, it was not as heavily discussed as other strategies.	Trainees noted instructors for exemplifying professionalism, respect, and commitment. ✓
			Inconsistency in the modeling of appearance standards by some undermines initial teachings. !

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention. OCP = operational camouflage pattern.

Key Observations

The Training Environment Generally Fosters Pride and Motivation

Across interviews, trainees and instructors described the Air Force training environment as rich in visual reminders of the mission and service culture, including aircraft imagery, heritage displays, and Air Force symbols. These cues were often described as motivating and as reinforcing a sense of belonging:

Seeing all the decommissioned planes on the parade field with the little emblems of bombs and things reminds you of just what the Air Force really is about—planes, close air support, things like that.—Trainee, Special Warfare

Visual Emphasis Often Reinforces Career-Field Identity over Air Force Identity

At the same time, many visual cues emphasized career-field or community identity rather than Air Force-wide identity. Trainees and instructors described strong career-field symbolism—particularly in specialized career fields—which could limit exposure to broader Air Force identity and airpower concepts:

There's memorabilia everywhere . . . If you go up into even their barracks on the third floor, they have murals of SR [special reconnaissance], of TACP [tactical air control party]. They have a bunch of stuff that students have left behind, logs, and even our weights have each of our CCTs [combat controllers] . . . Wherever you go, you know you're in that bubble of Special Warfare.—TTI

This emphasis might strengthen occupational identity while unintentionally narrowing how trainees understand their place within the larger Air Force enterprise.

Uniforms Strongly Reinforce Identity, but Not All Symbols Resonate Equally

Uniforms, insignia, and regalia were consistently described as powerful markers of identity, belonging, and commitment, with their meaning tied to the effort and discipline required to earn and wear them. Sister-service interviewees emphasized that uniforms and insignia visibly distinguish service members from civilians and signal membership in the profession of arms.

Air Force trainees and instructors similarly expressed pride in wearing the uniform. The OCPs was generally viewed positively for their functionality and professionalism, reinforcing a sense of belonging and seriousness of service. However, some trainees noted that the OCPs' similarities to Army uniforms reduced Air Force distinctiveness:

When I was putting my OCPs on, I felt like I was part of the Air Force. I felt so good about myself. . . . I just felt like I'm in the military now. Now, is it the Air Force uniform? No. I felt like I was in the Army.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

In contrast, occupationally distinctive uniforms and insignia, such as flight suits and specialty badges, were more likely to evoke pride and emotional connection, though often within specific career-field communities rather than across the Air Force.

The Air Force dress uniforms—particularly dress blues—were frequently described as lacking symbolic clarity or distinctiveness when compared with those of other services, raising questions about their effectiveness in conveying Air Force heritage and warrior identity:

I would say, [the Air Force's] uniforms aren't the best . . . You're wearing a business jacket. Are you a warrior? Or are you a businessman?—Army Veteran

Role Modeling Reinforces Identity When Consistent, but Inconsistency Can Undermine It

Many trainees described instructors as influential role models who shape how they understand what it means to serve in the Air Force. Trainees noted that instructors who consistently demonstrated professionalism, discipline, and respect—while maintaining appropriate authority—reinforced Airman identity and fostered trust:

Actions speak a lot louder than words. Anybody can teach a class, but how they're living speaks louder than telling us what to do.—Trainee, Special Warfare

Instructors likewise emphasized the importance of modeling standards in everyday interactions, noting that trainees closely observe how leaders carry themselves both inside and outside formal training settings:

They definitely look. They definitely watch. I think that's really important. Even being outside, the anthem goes off, letting them see us not try to hurry and run off to our car. Instead, actually stop and do the proper customs and courtesy.—MTL

At the same time, both instructors and trainees reported that inconsistency in modeling of appearance and conduct standards—particularly uniform compliance and physical fitness—could weaken the credibility of identity messaging, especially during technical training. When trainees observed leaders who did not adhere to the same standards as those emphasized in BMT, they described difficulty reconciling those behaviors with the expectations they had been taught:

For a lot of these Airmen, this [technical training] is their first time ever meeting or seeing somebody in this career field and the Air Force, aside from an MTI [military training instructor]. Sometimes it feels like we're putting up the wrong people into these first-glance positions. An instructor who maybe shaves every other day or looks like they're about to be busting the seams in their uniform, that sort of thing. To me, that distances those Airmen from feeling like they're in the Air Force.—TTI

Together, these perspectives suggest that role modeling is a powerful mechanism for identity formation, but one that depends on consistent adherence to visible standards, including uniform compliance and physical fitness, across leaders and training environments.

Do: Build Identity Through Shared Practice and Action

The Do pillar reflects how identity is reinforced through shared routines, challenges, and recognition (see Table 3.4). These experiences translate values and expectations into action, fostering discipline, resilience, and a sense of belonging.

Table 3.4. The Do Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lesson from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Build habits, routines, and discipline	Regularly enforce completion of tasks to standard, such as physical fitness; conduct teamwork exercises; and adhere to protocols to foster discipline and commitment.	Routine activities are fundamentally important because they demand adherence to standards and foster camaraderie through collective effort.	<p>Trainees appreciate daily routines to build discipline, camaraderie, and purpose. ✓</p> <p>Inconsistency in enforcement of appearance standards suggests that some standards are optional. !</p>
Embrace mission-related challenges	Design, foster, and guide individuals through difficult situations that test their fortitude, and prepare them for current and future demands. Do this while building Airman resilience, camaraderie, and shared purpose.	Hardship is considered central to military training and culture because enduring challenges builds resilience, forges bonds, and fosters belonging and identity.	<p>Challenges are essential, and the PACER FORGE concept is viewed as promising. ✓</p> <p>PACER FORGE Provisional does not provide sufficient responsibility to every trainee and clear ties to the Air Force mission. !</p>
Recognize achievements and milestones	Intentionally acknowledge key events—both personal and collective—to highlight important contributions and encourage Airmen to internalize their significance.	Meaningful celebrations, planned and spontaneous, provide key moments to reflect on achievements, honor heritage, and strengthen pride.	<p>Trainees noted that meaningful moments of recognition in BMT enhanced their sense of belonging. ✓</p> <p>Some interviewees expressed a desire for more-relevant celebrations to enhance morale and identity. !</p>

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention.

Key Observations

Routines and Discipline Build Belonging When Standards Are Enforced Consistently

Trainees and instructors consistently described daily routines and rituals—such as inspections, physical training (PT), customs and courtesies, and recitation of the Airman’s Creed—as important mechanisms for building discipline, reinforcing expectations, and fostering a sense of belonging. Even when described as frustrating or tedious, these routines were often viewed as meaningful because they provided structure and signaled entry into military service:

Making my bed properly in the morning is me setting myself up for an easy success to start the day. I can tackle everything else more properly. It's a small thing that got hammered into me.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

We're in the military, so there's customs, courtesies, standards that they set on us, and we're expected to keep [them].—Trainee, Materiel Management

Instructors emphasized that routines are most effective when paired with active monitoring and corrective feedback, which help trainees understand that standards are real and consequential. Many trainees appeared to appreciate this approach, describing corrective actions as purposeful rather than arbitrary and as preparation for future responsibilities:

MTIs knew when to turn on their game face and yell at us to make sure that we're in line. Then at the same time, they knew when to calm down a little bit because a leader really must know when to be a friend versus be a leader. I think the MTIs were perfect at doing that.—Trainee, Materiel Management

At the same time, trainees and instructors noted that inconsistency in enforcement of appearance standards—particularly later in training or outside tightly controlled environments—can weaken the impact of these routines. Some trainees said that they interpreted uneven application of standards as a signal that expectations are flexible or optional:

Near the end of BMT, a lot of MTIs—they kind of relax. They start playing music and let you do your thing. My MTI stayed very disciplined, and he showed us the entire time what it looks like to be in his position and to lead people.—Trainee, Security Forces

We heard several possible reasons for these inconsistencies, such as frequent changes in standards, too heavy of an emphasis on the individual, and reluctance to confront peers or subordinates. Together, these observations suggest that routines and discipline are effective tools for identity formation but only when they are applied consistently and reinforced across leaders and settings.

Shared Hardship Strengthens Identity When Purpose and Responsibility Are Clear

Sister-service interviewees consistently emphasized shared hardship as an important contributor to identity formation, describing adversity as a mechanism that can build trust, resilience, and cohesion when it is clearly framed and experienced collectively:

Nothing pulls people together and makes them feel integrated like adversity. So, all the crap they put you through. It matters. It works. I hate to admit it.—Navy Veteran

Air Force trainees similarly described pride and accomplishment after completing physically and mentally demanding tasks, particularly when those challenges were understood as purposeful and connected to expectations of military service:

When we accomplish those rucks or as we graduate BMT or tech school, I think that's when we feel it the most—when we are actually accomplishing [something] and we proved ourselves to be worthy.—Trainee, Security Forces³⁴

PACER FORGE Provisional Offers a Promising Crucible-Type Experience, but Engagement Varies

PACER FORGE Provisional is the Air Force's newly implemented culminating event in BMT, designed to function as a crucible-type experience (see Appendix D for additional details). Conducted over multiple days in a simulated deployed environment, the exercise is intended to expose trainees to stress, teamwork, and mission-oriented tasks aligned with the Air Force's DOGS responsibilities: defending the air base and its systems; operating on missions or mission systems and equipment; generating air and space assets or forces; and sustaining the base, assets, or forces.

Across interviews, PACER FORGE Provisional was widely described as a promising identity-building initiative, particularly by trainees who were given active roles or leadership responsibilities. These trainees reported greater engagement, ownership, and opportunities to practice decisionmaking and teamwork under stress:

I enjoyed PACER FORGE because I was a TDL [tactical deployment leader], which means I get to point people to where they're supposed to be . . . So, I constantly felt a sense of accomplishment.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

At the same time, many trainees described variation in how PACER FORGE Provisional was experienced. Some reported limited tasking, extended periods of waiting, or insufficient explanation of how specific activities connected to the broader Air Force mission. These factors reduced the perceived meaning of the exercise for some participants. Of the 33 TTIs and MTLs who reported post-PACER FORGE Provisional interactions with trainees, only two reported noticeable changes; most reported no visible effects. This raises questions about whether PACER FORGE Provisional's impacts emerge later, are context dependent, or require different measures to detect.

Recognition Reinforces Belonging, but Continuity Is Limited Beyond Basic Military Training

Participants described recognition and milestones as meaningful moments that help translate training experiences into a sense of belonging and identity. During BMT, symbolic acts of recognition—such as receiving name tapes, participating in coin ceremonies, and graduating³⁵—were frequently cited as moments when Airmen felt they had crossed a threshold into the service:

It was a small thing, because we all got issued this in BMT, but when we got our name tapes on our OCP uniforms, and I was able to put it on and actually wear it. Seeing the U.S. Air Force and my family's name—it was right on the same level. It felt great.

³⁴ A ruck is an exercise that involves purposeful walking while carrying a weighted backpack (rucksack) loaded to a specified weight.

³⁵ Graduation, in particular, was described as a collective milestone that reinforced shared accomplishment and helped Airmen see themselves as part of a larger group. A coin ceremony is when a trainee receives a coin signifying their transition from trainee to Airman.

And yes, it definitely made me feel like I was a part of the Air Force.—Trainee,
Aircrew Operations

Sister-service interviewees similarly emphasized the role of shared and recurring recognition rituals—both formal and informal—in reinforcing service identity. These events were described as durable markers of belonging that remained consistent across units and over time:

Every unit does it. It celebrates our heritage and who we are.—Marine Corps Veteran

By contrast, recognition during technical training and beyond was described as more variable. Fewer participants recalled meaningful or consistent milestones during this phase; one instructor noted that collective experiences were more often associated with punishment than with celebration:

There is a view that only punishment is collective. Normally, when they hear “Airman” as a whole, what I perceive the Airmen think about is punishment. When one person messes up, everybody has to get punished.—TTI

Several trainees and instructors expressed a desire for more-relevant and -consistent recognition practices to help sustain morale and reinforce Airman identity beyond BMT:

The . . . celebrations . . . It absolutely matters. I’ve seen it many times. People say they don’t care, but they do.—TTI

Taken together, these observations suggest that recognition plays a clear role in reinforcing belonging and identity during BMT but that uneven continuity across training phases can limit the longer-term impact on Airman identity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we applied the Tell–Show–Do framework to examine how service identity is formed during initial Air Force training. The Air Force has implemented a variety of mechanisms aligned with all three pillars, but variation in application and integration across training environments could limit their collective impact. In the next chapter, we outline recommendations to improve alignment and effectiveness of these mechanisms.

Recommendations

Air Force trainees seem to embrace the Airman identity and can articulate how their roles support the broader Air Force mission. However, not all trainees seem to understand or embrace an Air-minded Warrior identity. We developed a practitioner-oriented framework of Tell–Show–Do to identify and apply strategies to instill a service identity. When we used the framework to evaluate existing Air Force and sister-service strategies, we found that the Air Force was doing a lot to promote service identity but could benefit from strengthening efforts in certain areas.

We offer three overarching recommendations (Table 4.1) to help the Air Force develop Air-minded Warrior identity in new Airmen. As Table 4.1 illustrates, a single course of action or step can address multiple issues, which reflects the interdependent nature of identity formation. Although we present the recommendations simply in the table, we offer additional detail later in this chapter to support implementation, clarify trade-offs, and illustrate how lessons from sister services can be adapted—rather than replicated—in the Air Force context.

Table 4.1. Summary of Recommendations Mapped onto the Tell–Show–Do Framework

Recommendation	Course of Action	Tell	Show	Do
1. Implement lessons learned from the sister services to improve how the Air Force builds service identity.	A. Identify and integrate practices that emphasize Air Force history (i.e., launch Project Old School).	•	•	•
	B. Consistently model and uphold appearance standards throughout initial training.	•	•	•
	C. Incorporate timely and appropriate recognition of achievements and milestones, and explore a redesign of the Air Force dress blues service uniform.	•	•	•
2. Further Invest in the PACER FORGE construct to enhance its effectiveness.	A. Design additional opportunities so that all recruits can have meaningful responsibilities.			•
	B. Incorporate more Air Force–centric elements by prioritizing Air Force–unique mission demands.	•	•	•
	C. Evaluate the current effectiveness to meet objectives and closely monitor future changes.		•	•
3. Clarify and communicate the broader context for Air-minded Warrior identity development.	A. Further define the problem and desired outcomes.	•		
	B. Develop more-detailed definitions of key identity concepts.	•		
	C. Communicate identity concepts and why they matter.	•		

We designed our first recommendation to offer targeted ways for the Air Force to enhance service identity by leveraging lessons learned from the sister services. This recommendation most directly aligns with our project objective, which was to identify concrete, “tactical” approaches that 2AF could implement to instill a strong sense of identity in Airmen. Our second recommendation focuses on the PACER FORGE construct, which is a major change to BMT that could affect identity development. Given its significance to 2AF, we devote specific attention to this initiative. Our final recommendation identifies broader, outstanding questions that warrant further attention. Although many of the questions we raise extend beyond the 2AF span of control, 2AF has the potential to serve as a thought leader, spearheading challenging discussions that explore the Air Force’s cultural identity and the meaning behind *Airminded Warrior*. Although this recommendation is presented last, we suggest that it be addressed first so that the Air Force can ensure that future initiatives are not only effective but also aligned with the overall vision for the Air Force’s future. The remainder of this chapter describes the specific findings that inform each course of action and outlines potential next steps.

Before describing our recommendations in detail, we emphasize that 2AF has been making significant changes to BMT and continues to do so. We learned that some of our recommended actions are already being pursued. For example, we learned that 2AF had already begun to actively pursue changes to the PACER FORGE construct that align with recommended course of action 2A (designing additional opportunities for recruits to assume meaningful responsibilities) and recommended course of action 2B (incorporating more Air Force–centric elements by prioritizing Air Force–unique mission demands). 2AF might also pursue activities aligned with recommended course of action 2C, which calls for evaluating PACER FORGE’s effectiveness and closely monitoring its evolution over time.

Since we completed the analysis for this project, we also learned that the Air Force had implemented guidance aligned with recommended course of action 1B to consistently model and uphold appearance standards throughout initial training. Specifically, two memorandums issued on September 30, 2025, by the Secretary of War (“Military Fitness Standards” and “Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation”),³⁶ along with updated Air Force–specific regulatory guidance issued on February 19, 2026 (DAF Guidance Memorandum 2026-02, indicating changes to DAF Instruction 36-2903),³⁷ emphasize the importance of consistency of standards in support of professionalism and service identity. Additionally, the reinstatement of duty identifier patches signals a deliberate effort to balance and reinforce both career-field identity and broader Air Force identity, which aligns with our emphasis on integrating functional and service-level identities.

The types of changes that the Air Force is making in this space suggest that our findings and recommendations align with recent Air Force leadership priorities to develop and maintain key service identities in Airmen.

³⁶ Pete Hegseth, Secretary of War, “Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation,” memorandum for senior Pentagon leadership, commanders of the combatant commands, and Department of War agency and field activity directors, September 30, 2025b; Pete Hegseth, Secretary of War, “Military Fitness Standards,” memorandum for senior Pentagon leadership, commanders of the combatant commands, and Department of War agency and field activity directors, September 30, 2025c.

³⁷ Richard L. Anderson, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, “Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum to DAFI 36-2903, Dress and Personal Appearance of the Department of the Air Force Personnel,” memorandum for distribution C, major commands, field commands, field operating agencies, and direct reporting units, DAF Guidance Memorandum 2026-02, February 19, 2026.

Recommendation 1: Implement Lessons Learned from the Sister Services to Improve How the Air Force Builds Service Identity

This recommendation focuses on concrete, near-term actions that 2AF can take to strengthen service identity during initial training. Although we are informed by lessons from sister services, we emphasize adaptation rather than replication, recognizing the Air Force’s distinct mission, culture, and operational context. Some elements extend beyond 2AF’s direct authority; however, 2AF is well positioned to shape foundational identity experiences that influence Airmen as they enter operational roles.

Recommended Course of Action 1A. Identify and Integrate Practices That Leverage Air Force History to Build an Emotional Connection and Reinforce Shared Identity (i.e., Launch Project Old School)

This recommended course of action primarily addresses the discrepancy in the integration and use of history during initial training between the sister services and the Air Force (i.e., share service history and lineage). In the sister services, historical facts, traditions, and stories are repeatedly leveraged, according to our interviewees, to connect members with their lineage, instill pride, and foster a deep sense of purpose. In contrast, although some instructors and communities within the Air Force incorporate historical elements in initial training, widespread efforts to use history as a tool for cultivating service culture remain limited. Additionally, this course of action is intended to further set clear expectations by stabilizing terminology and appearance standards, connect roles to mission success by laying the groundwork for an enterprise perspective (i.e., sharing forcewide contributions to mission success), and shape the physical environment by making history memorable and relevant through visual artifacts.

Except for the Space Force, the Air Force is the youngest branch, established as an independent service in 1947. In contrast, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps were all founded in 1775, with the Coast Guard following in 1790. Although younger, the Air Force possesses more than 75 years of independent service history and a long lineage of distinguished combat aviation history that can support a strong and distinctive service identity.³⁸

Despite the availability of many historical programs and repositories,³⁹ Air Force history is not consistently embedded in BMT or technical training in ways that resonate with new Airmen. Trainees described limited exposure to history and difficulty connecting it to their developing sense of identity:

There’s just a handful of times where we actually learn about the history of the Air Force. And even then, it was on these little tablets, and it was very quick, and it didn’t

³⁸ The origins of the Air Force extend through the USAAF’s predecessor, the Army Air Corps (established through Public Law 69-446, Air Corps Act, July 2, 1926) and earlier to prior Army aviation units (e.g., the Air Service).

³⁹ The U.S. Air Force History and Museums Program encompasses a wide, integrated network dedicated to preserving and presenting Air Force history. This network includes historians, archivists, museums, research centers, and unit-level history offices across the force. Key components include the Air Force Historical Research Agency, the Air Force Historical Support Division, and the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, along with multiple field museums and heritage centers—collectively representing one of the most extensive military history enterprises in the world.

go very much in depth. That should be a key thing that we should learn—the actual history of the Air Force.—Trainee, Special Warfare

To address this gap, we recommend initiating something we call *Project Old School*⁴⁰—an effort to integrate Air Force history more deliberately into initial training as an identity-building tool. The goal is not to add historical content for its own sake but to connect Airmen to the service’s lineage, purpose, and shared story. Guiding principles for Project Old School include the following:

- **Represent the whole force.** Integrate historical examples that reflect the full breadth of Air Force contributions—including combat, combat support, and combat service support roles—to reinforce how diverse functions enable mission success.⁴¹
- **Learn, but authentically tailor.** Draw lessons from communities that effectively use history and tradition (e.g., Marine Corps, Air Force Special Warfare) while ensuring that Air Force history is presented in ways that align with Air Force values, mission demands, and workforce characteristics.⁴²
- **Make it meaningful.** Present history through powerful storytelling and experiential approaches that emphasize relevance and purpose, rather than relying primarily on slide-based instruction.

Table 4.2 provides an illustrative, phased approach for integrating service history into training and is intended to spark conversation and undergo further refinement.

⁴⁰ Although we propose a potential label for this initiative that will convey its purpose and capture interest, we acknowledge that this title might not resonate. Nevertheless, we offer our rationale behind its selection:

- *Project:* We selected the term *Project* to convey that this is meant to be an organized effort to achieve a specific goal with a defined timeline and set of resources. We also selected this term given its connection to RAND (the current effort is being done within RAND Project AIR FORCE).
- *Old School:* Drawing inspiration from millennial pop culture films, we attempt to creatively play on the idea that Air Force history, often viewed as “old,” should be integrated into “school,” or initial training.

⁴¹ As one instructor said,

If we’re going to focus on airmindedness or the identity of an Airman, focus more on great people who are not direct warfighters to show that, even if you’re not the one holding a gun or dropping a bomb, . . . your contribution is meaningful and impactful. Highlight great people from finance, communications—people who do those everyday jobs.—TTI

⁴² For example, consider the following questions: What would be the essential elements of the Air Force mission, core values, and way of life (i.e., workforce characteristics) that should be understood about Air Force history? What are the Air Force’s distinguishing strengths? What about the Air Force allows it to best serve the needs of the United States?

Table 4.2. An Example Approach to Project Old School

Phase	Step	Stakeholder	Action
Collect and select	Identify and gather material focused on Airman identity.	Historians, public affairs, subject-matter experts across AFSCs	Compile key people, events, sacrifices, symbols, and traditions from official and unofficial sources; vet for operations security and legal considerations.
	Curate and prioritize material according to a predefined framework.	Cross-functional military panel (based on rank and AFSC), organizational psychologists	Select a balanced set of material (representing the spectrum of AFSCs across combat arms, combat support, and combat service support positions) and map these selections to values, mission, and Airman identity; write two to three sentences on why it matters.
Translate and package	Make the material memorable (i.e., story craft).	Public affairs, NCOs, junior members	Translate curated material into a variety of engaging formats (e.g., 90-second “History Hits,” story cards, slides, posters) to make stories memorable. Avoid overreliance on PowerPoint.
	Develop instructor resources.	Education and training personnel (MTIs, TTIs, and MTLs)	Create guides that show how to connect stories to values, milestones, and training tasks.
Embed and reinforce	Integrate into milestones and training.	Training leadership, instructors	Integrate into curriculum, routines, milestones, and experiential activities—such as aircraft exposure (e.g., flybys, rides)—making heritage tangible and connect trainees to the why.
	Shape the environment.	Facilities, design, and information technology (for screens) personnel	Use lineage walls, simulators, replicas, digital signage, and displays to reinforce identity, supported by plaques with additional information.
	Provide instructors guidance.	Education and training personnel, historians	Provide guidance to instructors on effective delivery, accuracy, and linking stories to identity. Create resource banks of stories, videos, and slides so that instructors can select examples that will work effectively for their recruits and trainees.
Evaluate and refresh	Assess and update.	Education and training personnel, historians, organizational psychologists	Collect feedback (through, e.g., surveys, after-action reports, usage metrics), assess effectiveness, and refresh material to keep it accurate, relevant, and meaningful.

NOTE: NCO = noncommissioned officer.

Recommended Course of Action 1B. Consistently Model and Uphold Appearance Standards Throughout Initial Training

This recommended course of action addresses inconsistencies in leader and instructor modeling and upholding appearance standards in BMT and technical training. Our sister-service interviewees highlighted the importance of leaders to model the standard to ensure that messaging about the importance of standards is reinforced. To reinforce the standards, leaders need to uphold them consistently (i.e., build habits, routines, and discipline). Modeling and upholding standards, especially when they change, will also help set clear expectations for Airman behavior.

Appearance standards (e.g., dress, grooming, physical fitness) play an important role in shaping service identity by signaling professionalism, discipline, and shared expectations. Air Force policy emphasizes that projecting a professional military image reflects both on individual Airmen and on the service as a whole.⁴³

As discussed in Chapter 3 (and Appendix C), Air Force training instructors and leaders are expected to model and enforce appearance standards. However, the Airmen we interviewed described inconsistent modeling and enforcement, particularly toward the end of BMT and during technical training. Participants identified several contributing factors, including frequent changes to standards, prioritization of individual career development over service identity, concerns about leadership pushback, and discomfort with confrontation.

To mitigate these challenges within the training environment, we recommend that 2AF do the following:

- **Improve communication of policy changes.** When appearance standards change, communicate updates clearly and promptly to instructional cadre. Consider maintaining a centralized, easily accessible repository of current standards.
- **Reinforce modeling expectations.** Reemphasize that instructors and leaders are expected to model and enforce appearance and conduct standards consistently throughout training. Provide concrete examples linking standards (e.g., uniform wear, physical fitness) to identity outcomes (e.g., esprit de corps, professionalism).
- **Support supervisors.** Provide supervisors of MTIs, MTLs, and TTIs with clearer guidance and tools—such as checklists and evaluation criteria—to support consistency in enforcement, accountability, and appropriate actions when standards are not met.

⁴³ See Director of Staff, Headquarters Air Force, *Air Force Culture*, Air Force Instruction 1-1, August 18, 2023, change 1, August 24, 2025, p. 25):

First impressions are often drawn based upon appearance. Projecting a good military image reflects not only on the members personally but also on the Air Force. Appearance matters both on and off duty and involves more than just the clothes Airmen wear. Projecting a professional image is paramount.

Recommended Course of Action 1C. Incorporate Timely, Appropriate, and Authentic Recognition of Meaningful Achievements and Milestones, and Explore a Redesign of the Air Force Dress Blues Service Uniform

This recommended course of action includes two related elements: celebration of achievements and milestones and dressing the part. Sister-service interviewees, particularly in the Marine Corps, cited the value of members coming together to celebrate achievements and milestones tied to the service (e.g., promotions). Some of our Air Force participants indicated a desire for the Air Force to have more-relevant celebrations to enhance Airmen’s morale and identity. Celebrating Air Force milestones offers a tangible way to share service history and lineage with Airmen. It can also help shape the physical environment by incorporating symbols and rituals tied to Air Force identity and airpower rather than those tied to specific career fields. However, some sister-service and Air Force participants commented that the Air Force dress blues service uniforms, which would be worn during service celebrations, appear too businesslike and are not unique so do not distinguish the Air Force as its own service. Therefore, to symbolize identity through uniform and insignia, especially during events to recognize important achievements and milestones, we recommend that Air Force leadership explore a redesign of the dress blues service uniform.

Achievements and Milestones

Formal ceremonies and informal recognitions play a crucial role in reinforcing service values and marking identity transitions. We do not advocate “mandatory fun” or indiscriminate recognition (i.e., “everyone gets a trophy”). Instead, we recommend recognizing meaningful achievements and milestones in a way that strengthens Airmen’s connection to the Air Force.

Although BMT includes several effective recognition moments, opportunities remain to extend recognition practices more consistently through technical training. Establishing these practices early could help normalize recognition in operational units, where milestone celebration appears uneven. To strengthen recognition practices, we recommend that the Air Force do the following:

- **Catalog existing recognition practices.** Identify formal and informal practices currently used across initial training and the broader force (see the list below for examples) and document their purpose, frequency, and how they are currently observed.
 - formal ceremonies and social events
 - graduations and commencements
 - promotion ceremonies
 - changes of command
 - retirement ceremonies
 - award ceremonies
 - memorial and remembrance ceremonies
 - reenlistment and oath ceremonies
 - unit activation and inactivation/redesignation
 - national and branch observances
 - military ball

- informal acknowledgments
 - coin presentations
 - call signs and nicknames
 - patches or symbols
 - end-of-week and end-of-exercise rituals
 - celebratory songs, cadences, and jodies
 - storytelling and informal toasts.
- **Assess relevance and perceptions.** Collect feedback from Airmen across ranks and career fields on whether and how these practices are experienced and which are perceived as most meaningful.
- **Prioritize and integrate effective practices.** Emphasize recognition events that clearly reflect Air Force values and identity and explicitly link them to service history and mission.
- **Monitor impact and refine over time.** Request feedback from trainees, instructors, and leaders to assess how ceremonies and recognitions are experienced and to evaluate their impact on service identity, motivation, and cohesion. Use this feedback to adjust practices over time to ensure that they remain relevant and meaningful.

Service Dress Uniform

Although this issue might appear minor, perception of the Air Force’s formal uniform (i.e., service dress) contributes meaningfully to service identity. Uniforms emerged repeatedly in our interviews as points of pride and connection to service. Many Airmen described the Air Force uniform as less distinctive and appealing than formal uniforms of other services, such as “Navy whites” or “Marine dress blues.” This finding is noteworthy because fostering pride in the organization can be more challenging when Airmen do not feel confident wearing uniforms that visibly and symbolically represent the service.

Although changes to the service dress uniform extend beyond 2AF’s authority and involve cost considerations, we suggest that the Air Force reassess the uniform’s design and symbolism as part of broader identity-building efforts.⁴⁴ Key steps could include the following:

- gathering Airmen’s feedback on current perceptions
- exploring Air Force–specific historical elements to enhance distinctiveness
- conducting cost–benefit analysis of potential changes
- piloting revised designs to inform future decisions.

⁴⁴ The Air Force explored redesigning its dress blues in 2018; however, the effort was deferred (Stephen Losey, “The Air Force Is Working on a New Dress Blues Uniform—and It’s Going Old School,” *Air Force Times*, August 15, 2018; Oriana Pawlyk, “New Dress Blues in 2019? Not Just Yet, Air Force Says,” *Military.com*, January 9, 2019).

Recommendation 2: Further Invest in the PACER FORGE Construct to Enhance Its Effectiveness

PACER FORGE Provisional represents a promising addition to BMT, designed to expose Airmen to Air Force DOGS (defend, operate, generate, and sustain air power) responsibilities. A key strength of this concept is its increased incorporation of adversity, which supports identity formation.⁴⁵ Many elements of PACER FORGE Provisional continue to evolve, and several improvements are already underway. Our findings suggest three areas in which continued refinement could help PACER FORGE Provisional more fully realize its intent.

Recommended Course of Action 2A. Design Additional Opportunities So That All Recruits Can Have Meaningful Responsibilities

Trainees consistently noted uneven access to meaningful roles, resulting in varying levels of engagement. Although not every recruit needs to perform the same tasks at the same time, the overall design should ensure that each recruit has opportunities to assume responsibility and contribute in a visible way, at least once during the exercise.⁴⁶

As the PACER FORGE construct continues to mature, options to increase engagement include the following:

- **Employ alternative scenario designs.** This could involve any of several approaches. For example, one trainee we interviewed suggested dividing recruits into two groups with one group attacking an Air Force asset, such as a runway, while the other group defends it.⁴⁷
- **Add smaller-scale activities.** Between the larger events, offer short activities that provide recruits opportunities to actively engage within an Air Force–centric context.
- **Make structured use of downtime.** This time could be allocated for sensegiving (i.e., cadre shapes how recruits understand, interpret, or assign meaning to experiences or events; see Appendix B) or cognitively heavy activities, such as recruits delivering and receiving constructive feedback, planning for the next simulation, or engaging in indoor “mini-challenges.” This could be particularly valuable during weather-related pauses.

Effectively designing and sustaining these opportunities will require significant investment of time, resources, and instructional capacity.

⁴⁵ See “Embrace Mission-Related Challenges” in Appendix C.

⁴⁶ A key question emerges: What conditions must all recruits experience? For example, should each recruit hold a leadership position? Should each have the opportunity to participate in such events as tactical combat casualty care courses? For a more comprehensive list of operationally relevant conditions that could serve as a starting point for this discussion, see Tracy C. Krueger, Sean Robson, Matthew Walsh, Anthony Adler, Beverly A. Weidmer, Matt Strawn, Lewis Schneider, Lisa Pelled Colabella, Yuliya Shokh, and Tiffany Berglund, *Assessment and Selection for U.S. Air Force Special Warfare: Vol. 2, Evaluating Objectives and Considering Improvements*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1199-1, 2024, Table 2.4.

⁴⁷ This approach incorporates elements of perspective-taking—actively imagining scenarios from an opponent’s vantage point—which has been linked to several benefits; however, the impact on service identity remains unclear (Gillian Ku, Cynthia S. Wang, and Adam D. Galinsky, “The Promise and Perversity of Perspective-Taking in Organizations,” *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 35, 2015).

Recommended Course of Action 2B. Incorporate More Air Force–Centric Elements by Prioritizing Air Force–Unique Mission Demands

We support 2AF’s ongoing efforts to further establish an airfield-centric experience to make more PACER FORGE exercises distinctive to and reflective of the Air Force. As 2AF pursues this initiative, we highlight different approaches to enhance the realism:⁴⁸

- physical fidelity: captures how closely the environment mirrors reality
- psychological fidelity: reflects the realism of mission demands and pressures
- sociological fidelity: represents the authenticity of roles, hierarchy, and team interactions.

Within training and simulation research, studies examining learning and performance outcomes indicate that psychological fidelity—such as cognitive demand, decision pressure, and consequence—often matters more than physical realism for skill acquisition.⁴⁹ However, these studies primarily evaluate performance and learning transfer, not identity outcomes. The research base remains limited in directly examining how different forms of fidelity—psychological, sociological, or physical— independently or jointly influence identity development, and evidence in this area remains theoretically grounded rather than empirically conclusive.

When the objective shifts from proficiency to identity formation, physical realism might play a more important role. In this context, the physical environment can serve as an experiential anchor that helps trainees internalize what it means to be an Airman. Such elements as airfield layouts, mission equipment, environmental conditions, and proximity to aircraft can reinforce legitimacy and belonging, making the experience feel less like a simulation and more like entry into a profession.

Accordingly, we recommend that PACER FORGE continue to emphasize Air Force–unique mission demands while balancing psychological and physical realism in ways appropriate to identity formation. Priority should be given to mission scenarios that reflect Air Force operational roles, such as flight line operations, cargo pallet building, and aircraft maintenance under simulated deployed conditions. These scenarios should also reflect the current strategic context.⁵⁰

In addition, selective enhancements to physical realism might assist with reinforcing identity. Examples include incorporating representative airfield features (e.g., runways, taxiways), equipping trainees with gear typical for deployed Airmen, using decommissioned aircraft or other tangible representations of airpower, and leveraging aircraft flyovers or nearby operational activity where feasible. Taken together, these adjustments could strengthen PACER FORGE’s contribution to identity formation by complementing cognitive challenge with more-immersive, contextually grounded experiences.

⁴⁸ The literature is inconsistent in defining *fidelity*, with varying terminology and overlapping constructs used across disciplines and studies.

⁴⁹ Susan G. Straus, Matthew W. Lewis, Kathryn Connor, Rick Eden, Matthew E. Boyer, Timothy Marler, Christopher M. Carson, Geoffrey E. Grimm, and Heather Smigowski, *Collective Simulation-Based Training in the U.S. Army: User Interface Fidelity, Costs, and Training Effectiveness*, RAND Corporation, RR-2250, 2019.

⁵⁰ We understand that, as of September 2025, several initiatives were underway to implement more Air Force–centric events. We emphasize the importance of ensuring, as these efforts progress, that these events be designed to provide sufficient roles and responsibilities for all recruits (recommended course of action 2A).

Recommended Course of Action 2C. Evaluate the Current Effectiveness to Meet Objectives and Closely Monitor Future Changes

The PACER FORGE construct is widely viewed as promising, but clearer articulation of its intended outcomes would support more-consistent evaluation and refinement. Specifically, defining what recruits should gain in terms of knowledge, behaviors, or attitudes related to warrior ethos, mission understanding, and initiative would help align execution with intent.⁵¹

Once these objectives are clearly defined, PACER FORGE should be assessed against them to inform learning and improvement rather than to judge success or failure of the construct. Potential approaches include

- informal listening sessions and direct observation
- surveys and interviews conducted at multiple points (e.g., immediately after PACER FORGE, during technical training, after initial operational assignment)
- input from multiple perspectives (e.g., of peers, of instructors, of operational leaders).

Together, these steps would allow PACER FORGE to continue evolving in response to evidence, experience, and changing mission demands.

Recommendation 3: Clarify and Communicate the Broader Context for Air-minded Warrior Identity Development

As discussed in Chapter 2, technical trainees said they viewed themselves as Airmen, but few seemed familiar with the Air-minded Warrior concept.⁵² Some trainees and instructors also expressed uncertainty about how to apply the term *warfighter*—whether it applies to all Airmen or only to those directly engaged in combat operations. This finding indicates a need for the Air Force to define and communicate expectations associated with Air-minded Warrior identity more clearly, which is consistent with the Tell pillar of our Tell–Show–Do framework

More broadly, our findings raise a fundamental question: What problem is the Air-minded Warrior identity intended to address? As described in Chapter 1, messaging by senior DAF leaders in the past few years suggests that this identity could promote a mission focus and could set the stage for Multi-Capable Airmen. If so, this implies an effort to influence Air Force culture, which has long been emphasized as focused on technical expertise, innovation, and individual autonomy. Cultural change of this scope requires clear articulation of goals, consistent messaging, leadership accountability, and sustained engagement with stakeholders.⁵³

⁵¹ Alternatively, the intent could be to just expose recruits to the working conditions of a forward operating Air Force base, such as enduring an air base attack, coping with poor sleeping and living arrangements, experiencing general discomfort and boredom, and operating through long days.

⁵² Recall that, during the time we collected the data, 2AF used the term *Air-minded Warfighter*.

⁵³ Lisa S. Meredith, Carra S. Sims, Benjamin Saul Batorsky, Adeyemi Okunogbe, Brittany L. Bannon, and Craig A. Myatt, *Identifying Promising Approaches to U.S. Army Institutional Change: A Review of the Literature on Organizational Culture and Climate*, RAND Corporation, RR-1588-A, 2017.

Although these issues extend beyond the direct authority of 2AF, clarifying the intent and meaning of Airminded Warrior identity is foundational to the effectiveness of other identity-building initiatives.⁵⁴ Accordingly, we do not attempt to prescribe a full culture-change strategy. Rather, Table 4.3 outlines three sequential steps to support clearer definition and communication of identity goals. The first step requires senior DAF leadership to establish purpose and desired outcomes, while the subsequent steps provide opportunities for 2AF to support, reinforce, and implement aligned messaging during initial training.

⁵⁴ A primary goal of this project was to discover the specific strategies that develop identity rather than pinpoint the nuances of that identity.

Table 4.3. Steps for Aligning Airminded Warrior Identity with Broader Air Force Goals

Recommended Course of Action	Description	Illustrative Questions
3A. Further define the problem and desired outcomes.	<p>i. More clearly define how Airminded Warriors will enable a mission-over-function mindset and what problem that will address for the Air Force.</p> <p>ii. Determine what outcomes would need to be achieved to solve the problem.</p> <p>iii. Account for existing Air Force characteristics, such as higher quality of life, technical proficiency, innovation, and independence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a mission-first orientation meant to change DAF culture? If so, why? • What challenges would this culture change address? How does culture change fit into other DAF institutional changes? • Is the concern that Airmen identify more with their function (career field) than with the Air Force? Or is the concern more that they value individualism over teamwork? • How can shared physical hardship and uniformity (as exemplified by the Marine Corps) be balanced against Air Force characteristics, such as independence and innovation?
3B. Develop more-detailed definitions of key identity concepts.	<p>i. Concretize the Airminded Warrior concept with examples of situations and behaviors.</p> <p>ii. Deconflict service identities, such as Airminded Warrior, Airman, and Multi-Capable Airman.</p> <p>iii. Connect occupational and work-role identities to broader Air Force identity concepts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does <i>Airminded</i> make sense for both Airmen and Guardians? • Is <i>warrior</i> or <i>warfighter</i> for any Airman, or is it only for certain contexts (e.g., deployments) or roles (operational versus support)? • Is Airman identity the foundation for Airminded Warrior identity? Would Multi-Capable Airmen also be Airminded Warriors? • Are there contexts in which having a stronger occupational identity (e.g., being a maintainer) is acceptable or even preferred (e.g., maintenance shop while in garrison)?
3C. Communicate identity concepts and why they matter.	<p>i. Develop a communication strategy that accounts for different audiences, which will likely require different and multiple communication methods.</p> <p>ii. Ensure that messages clearly describe how having an Airminded Warrior identity will meet specific Air Force goals. Use specific examples (e.g., behaviors, situations) to add clarity.</p> <p>iii. Develop and execute a plan to monitor and evaluate whether the messages are working as intended.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What messages should be conveyed to training leaders and instructors and which to recruits and trainees? How should messages be conveyed (e.g., senior leader speech, formal class instruction, online forums)? • How will Airmen perform better in different mission environments if they adopt an Airminded Warrior identity? • How would Airmen in support roles demonstrate Airminded Warrior identity? How would Airmen in operational roles do so? • When Airmen are surveyed to learn what they think it means to be an Airminded Warrior, do their responses align with the intended message?

Conclusion

The Air Force is making sweeping changes to BMT to develop Air-minded Warriors. We offer specific ways in which 2AF can improve BMT, as well as technical training, to promote an Air Force service identity. However, our analysis suggests that it is not always clear which service identity—Airman, Air-minded Warrior, or both—should be the main focus in training. Our findings also indicate that the Air Force will need to determine how these identities should be expected to interact with the career-field identities that trainees will likely develop after they graduate. In short, successful development of the Air-minded Warrior identity in new Airmen will require clearer links to Air Force strategic goals, deconfliction of identity definitions, and a well-executed communication strategy. If successful, the communication strategy can serve as a model for broader Air Force institutional change efforts involving Air Force identity.

Methods

We used a qualitative approach to understand the process through which members of organizations—broadly and in military service—develop identities. This appendix details our methodology for the literature review and how we selected participants and locations for interviews and focus groups. We also demonstrate how our data analysis supports the findings and recommendations presented in the body of the report.

Literature Review

To explore the research literature on identity formation in organizations, we conducted a narrative review of relevant peer-reviewed scientific publications. In this review, we sought to summarize and synthesize current scholarship on professional identities. We found articles that discuss how members of organizations develop identities, types of professional identity (e.g., organization, occupation, team), how people manage conflicts between professional identities, and the positive and negative effects that professional identities can have on individuals and organizations. Two members of the team carefully read these articles and drafted summaries of key points most relevant to this effort.

We also planned to conduct a systematic literature search of historical strategies and practices that the sister services have used to develop strong service identities in their members. However, we encountered two major challenges. The first challenge is that historical reviews tend not to evaluate identity-development practices, and so much of what we found lacked relevance to this effort. The second challenge is that literature documenting identity-development practices in the sister services did not provide information on how these practices were implemented or lessons learned. Given that the focus of this effort is on lessons learned about identity development, we chose to rely on interviews with members of the sister services for types of identity-development practices and for their perception of the best and worst qualities of those practices. When possible, we supplemented our interviews with literature to provide historical context when those practices were implemented.

Qualitative Methods

We conducted semistructured interviews and focus groups with members of the Air Force and sister services. Our questions focused on the development, maintenance, and associated challenges and opportunities of service identity. Table A.1 reports a high-level overview of our participant samples.

Table A.1. Overview of Interview and Focus Group Participants

Service	Time Frame	Type of Participant	Data Collection Method	Number of Participants
Sister service	May–June 2025	RAND employee ^a	Interviews (virtual)	45
		Army fellow at RAND	Interviews (virtual)	5 ^b
Air Force	July 2025	TTI	Interviews (virtual and in person)	29
		MTL	Interviews (virtual)	5
		Technical trainee	Focus groups (in person)	127
Total				211

^a Most of these RAND employees are former service members; 11 were still serving in National Guard or reserve positions.

^b Because our team was already on-site in San Antonio in July 2025 for the trainee focus groups, we were able to conduct five on-site interviews with TTIs and MTLs.

Because the sister-service interviewees were mostly veterans, we also include information on how long they had been out of the service. As shown in Table A.2, almost one-third were still affiliated (32 percent) and another 28 percent had left service within the preceding ten years.

Table A.2. Years Since Sister-Service Participants Had Left Military Service

Years Since Leaving Service	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
0 (still affiliated)	16	32%
1–5	8	16%
6–10	6	12%
11–15	4	8%
16–20	4	8%
More than 20	9	18%
Missing data	3	6%

Data Collection Procedures

Each interview and focus group had these features in common:

- **Protocols:** We conducted semistructured interviews and focus groups.
- **Informed consent:** Participants were asked for spoken consent to participate.
- **Audio recordings:** To ensure that we captured the details on participants’ experiences and perspectives, we used handheld audio devices to record each session. The audio files were uploaded to Kiteworks for transfer to a third-party transcription service, which converted

audio files to transcripts.⁵⁵ Team members deleted the audio files from the recording devices after files were transferred to the Kiteworks site.

In the following sections, we provide more details on participant selection, sample characteristics, and specific methods for data collection.

Sister-Service Interviews

We conducted 50 interviews with active-duty service members, reservists, and veterans from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Most participants had served or were actively serving in the Army ($n = 17$), Navy ($n = 16$), and Marine Corps ($n = 13$) as officers. The service branch with the lowest representation is the Coast Guard ($n = 4$). Table A.3 summarizes the number of participants by service branch and their personnel categories.

Table A.3. Number of Sister-Service Interviewees, by Service and Personnel Category

Service Branch	Officers	Enlisted	Enlisted and Later Commissioned as	
			Officers	Total Participants
Army	13	4	0	17
Coast Guard	4	0	0	4
Marine Corps	10	2	1	13
Navy	12	1	3	16
Total	39	7	4	50

Initially, we invited RAND staff who indicated in their internal RAND biographical summaries that they previously served (in either an active or reserve component) or were currently serving in one or more of the sister services to participate in the sister-service interviews. At the end of each interview, we asked them to refer us to others with a similar background. In total, we conducted 50 semistructured interviews using Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted about an hour.

Air Force Technical Training Instructors, Military Training Leaders, and Trainees

Because we found literature that suggests the importance of occupational identity, we wanted to ensure that we sampled Air Force participants from different career fields. We selected career fields that varied in terms of size, reputation, and proximity to operations.⁵⁶ For example, we included career fields with reputations for strong role identification and internal subcultures (e.g., Special Warfare).

⁵⁵ Kiteworks is a secure file-sharing platform.

⁵⁶ We selected current enlisted career fields listed in DAF Enlisted Classification Directory. See Air Force Personnel Center, *Department of the Air Force Enlisted Classification Directory (DAFECD)*, October 31, 2024.

We also included career fields with large numbers of trainees (e.g., Security Forces), as well as career fields that were closer to Air Force operations (e.g., Aircrew Operations) and those that provide support to operations (e.g., Materiel Management).

After requesting points of contact for 17 career fields (representing 25 Air Force specialties), we obtained contact information for 42 TTIs in 12 career fields (representing 13 Air Force specialties), six MTLs, and points of contact for seven trainee career fields. In total, we conducted 33 TTI interviews representing ten career fields, four MTL interviews representing three career fields, and 16 focus group discussions across four career fields.⁵⁷ On average, our participants had served in their current roles for 22.8 months (ranging from two months to 110 months) and in the Air Force for 13.2 years (ranging from five years to 33 years). Of the 29 instructors in our sample, most did not have military education (21 of 29).

For **Air Force TTIs and MTLs**, we conducted semistructured interviews with instructors in person, through Microsoft Teams, and on the telephone. When our interviews took place in person, we used classrooms or offices to minimize distractions and protect participant privacy and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. We conducted interviews with 32 active-duty military TTIs and one civilian TTI. We also interviewed four MTLs. Table A.4 shows the number of TTI interviewees by career field and rank.

Table A.4. Technical Training Instructor Interviewee Career Fields

Career Field		Count
1A	Aircrew Operations	9
1B	Cyber Warfare Operations	15
1N	Intelligence	4
1Z	Special Warfare	5
Total		33

For **Air Force technical trainees**, we conducted focus groups with trainees in person at locations in San Antonio, Texas (Lackland Air Force Base and Camp Bullis). Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. In total, we conducted 16 focus groups with 127 technical trainees spanning four career fields (Table A.5).

⁵⁷ We initially planned to conduct focus groups across more career fields but were limited on time to complete them at more than one location.

Table A.5. Technical Trainee Focus Group Characteristics

Career Field		Focus Group Session	Number of Participants
1A	Aircrew Operations	1	5
		2	5
		3	5
		4	5
		Total	20
1Z	Special Warfare	1	10
		2	10
		3	7
		4	11
		Total	38
2S	Materiel Management	1	9
		2	8
		3	8
		4	4
		Total	29
3P	Security Forces	1	10
		2	10
		3	10
		4	10
		Total	40
Total			127

Data Analysis with Muse QDA

We used an AI-enabled qualitative analysis platform, Muse QDA, for the sister-service interview analysis. We conducted preliminary analysis using Muse QDA for the Air Force interviews and focus groups. However, we determined that we did not gain enough fidelity on the nuances we needed for the Air Force interview and focus group findings with Muse QDA, so we reverted to a more traditional manual coding method for those transcripts. The rest of this section focuses on methods involving Muse QDA, given the relative newness of human–AI qualitative coding.

Overview

We used Muse QDA,⁵⁸ a RAND-developed qualitative data analysis application, to analyze the transcripts from our interviews and focus group discussions. Muse QDA uses AI and large language models (LLMs) to suggest codebooks, annotate excerpts, and label data in the transcripts. We used an inductive–deductive blend generation strategy in which an LLM coding agent searches for codes in the dataset based on the project description. Next, we prompted Muse QDA to apply the codes to a small sample of excerpts.

Informed by these preliminary findings, we adjusted the coding scheme. For example, we prompted Muse QDA to analyze excerpts 300 words in length, rather than our initial direction of shorter excerpts that were 100 to 200 words in length, to preserve context and analyze broader concepts. We also asked Muse QDA to identify four specific parent codes to organize the data for sister-service interviews, and it generated the following:

- identity-development strategies
- structural and environmental factors (e.g., proximity to danger during deployment)
- trade-offs of having a strong service identity (e.g., higher morale versus insularity)
- how the sister services perceive the Air Force.

For Air Force interviews and focus groups, we asked Muse QDA to identify six to seven specific parent themes organizing the data, and it generated the following:

- what it means to be an Airman
- career-field identity versus Air Force identity
- Air Force culture
- instilling Air Force identity
- PACER FORGE Provisional
- defining the Air Force’s mission.

After using Muse QDA to organize the data by parent codes, we allowed the AI agent to create child codes for a nuanced analysis. In the settings, we allowed Muse QDA to assign multiple codes to individual excerpts in case there was overlap in themes. However, we did not require Muse QDA to assign a code to every excerpt, so some excerpts are not coded (i.e., where the content did not fit the codebook).

Codebook Generation and Coding Process

We used Muse QDA as a tool to assist in iterating and generating a codebook. First, we prompted the LLM with descriptions of the project scope and research aims. Next, we evaluated the AI-generated codes from this initial prompt and developed descriptions of parent themes we were looking for. Finally, we made final edits to the descriptions of both the project and desired parent themes, which are shown in Table A.6.

⁵⁸ Muse QDA’s integration within RAND’s secure enclave allows the secure handling of sensitive data, including for interviews and focus groups. Also, in accordance with human subject protection requirements, all personally identifiable information was excluded from the data to ensure participant privacy.

Table A.6. Verbatim Descriptions Included in the Prompt for Muse QDA

Project Description	Parent Theme Description
<p>Sister-service veterans and current service members at RAND</p> <p>We want to understand how the Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard build identity in their service members and how we can use those lessons to build Airmen identity.</p>	<p>Please create codes around perceptions of military service identities (i.e., as Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Coasties), their methods for building identity, and any other themes you find. Themes must include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identity development strategies (such as storytelling, modeling behavior, physical hardship suffered as a group, etc.) 2. Environmental or structural differences in training and operations between the services (such as differences in degree of physical hardship, how close to the fight/how much danger they are in when deployed, mutual responsibility for a platform (i.e., a ship or machine) or life, Officer/Enlisted relationship, people-centric vs platform-centric services, general/shared vs specific/technical duties) 3. Tradeoffs of having strong identities (both positive and negative) 4. How other services view the Air Force (both positive and negative)
<p>Semistructured interviews and focus groups with currently serving Airmen talking about their identity as Airmen in the US Air Force. This is social science research aiming to understand what identities the Airmen have, how strong those identities are, and the culture and mission of the US Air Force.</p>	<p>Semistructured interviews and focus groups with Air Force TTIs, MTLs, and technical trainees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are looking for the following parent themes: What it means to be an Airman (with at least the child themes of 1a) core qualities and traits, 1b) defining the mission of the Air Force, 1c) relationship to the mission of the Air Force, and 1d) relationship between warfighter identity) • Role identity compared to Air Force identity (with at least the child themes of 2a) do Airmen generally identify more strongly with their role/AFSC or being an Airman/in the Air Force, 2b) positives of strong role identity, 2c) negatives of strong role identity) • Cultural traits of the Air Force (with at least the child codes of 3a) core qualities and traits, 3b) differences between the Air Force and other services, 3c) motivations for joining, 3d) challenges in instilling a unified culture) • Instilling Air Force identity (with at least the child themes of 4a) Tell, Using narratives to shape how people understand their role, their history, and the standards they're expected to uphold, such as telling stories about heroism and sacrifice, using common language or terms, or emphasizing specific values, 4b) See, How the visual environment and what we observe around us reinforce identity, such as by seeing or observing symbols, uniforms, heritage displays, or role model behavior, 4c) Do, Providing hands-on experiences, shared challenges, and meaningful rituals that help people feel part of something larger, such as culminating events, challenges, daily routines, or celebrations, 4d) standards, discipline, and accountability, and 4e) challenges and suggestions for strengthening Air Force identity) • PACER FORGE Provisional (with at least the child codes of 5a) Positives, 5b) Negatives, 5c) Impact on trainees, and 5d) Suggestions for improvement) • Defining the mission of the Air Force.

Using the project and parent theme descriptions (shown in Table A.6), Muse QDA generated an initial codebook structure from a subset of the data (e.g., 39 out of 50 transcripts for sister-service interviews) because of processing limitations with the AI application. We had several discussions about how to edit the codebook, such as whether to add or delete codes. After finalizing the codebook,

we prompted Muse QDA to apply the codebook to the entire dataset ($N = 50$ transcripts for sister-service interviews and $N = 53$ transcripts for Air Force interviews and focus groups).

Verification of Artificial Intelligence—Applied Codes and Interrater Reliability Checks

Given that best practices for validating AI-applied codes are still evolving, we followed human validation guidelines for deductive thematic analysis with AI assistance.⁵⁹ These guidelines suggest that researchers manually code a subset of the dataset (roughly 10 to 15 percent) to establish a reference framework.⁶⁰ To verify Muse QDA's coding accuracy, two team members analyzed every tenth tagged excerpt within each child-level code. When evaluating the accuracy of the code, the team gave three sources of feedback to Muse QDA on its performance: thumbs up, thumbs down, and clicking "X." A thumbs up indicated that the tagged excerpt illustrated or fit the code description. A thumbs down indicated that the code did not align with the tagged excerpt. An X indicated a neutral response, which did not give feedback to Muse QDA about the accuracy of the code applied to the excerpt.

The Muse QDA platform calculated a raw accuracy score for each parent code indicating the percentage of cases in which the human and AI agreed (without accounting for chance agreement). We chose to calculate raw accuracy for parent codes rather than for child codes because there were too few scores to compare for child codes. We reported raw accuracy instead of Cohen's kappa (an agreement score accounting for chance agreement) because there were instances of high levels of imbalance in classification (i.e., most annotations were *yes* or *no*) such that agreement by chance was highly likely. We used the following cutoffs to interpret raw accuracy scores: slight (0 to 20 percent), fair (21 to 40 percent), moderate (41 to 60 percent), substantial (61 to 80 percent), and almost perfect (81 to 100 percent).⁶¹ On average, the team and the AI were in agreement ($M = 73.59$ percent) about which codes to assign to which excerpts for the sister-service interview analysis (minimum = 65 percent, maximum = 81 percent; see Table A.7).

⁵⁹ Before engaging in the process of verifying AI-applied codes to excerpts, we had discussions with what RAND calls an *in-stride reviewer*—an internal peer reviewer who reviews methodology prior to execution. The purpose of seeking input from the in-stride reviewer was to gain additional insight into the most robust approach to validating code application. We were advised that, when using new software or analytic tools, it is best to check the accuracy of AI-generated codes across the entire dataset. However, there are no clear guidelines on how much data should be reviewed to ensure alignment with human interpretations when using an inductive–deductive approach to thematic analysis. Additionally, the amount of data that was checked by a human was influenced by resource constraints and other project-specific considerations.

⁶⁰ Sara Amani, Lance White, Trini Balart, Karan Watson, and Kristi Shryock, "Applying Generative AI for Thematic Analysis: A Model for Researchers Exploring Qualitative Methods," February 7, 2025.

⁶¹ Maximo R. Prescott, Samantha Yeager, Lillian Ham, Carlos D. Rivera Saldana, Vanessa Serrano, Joey Narez, Dafna Paltin, Jorge Delgado, David J. Moore, and Jessica Montoya, "Comparing the Efficacy and Efficiency of Human and Generative AI: Qualitative Thematic Analyses," *JMIR AI*, Vol. 3, 2024; J. Richard Landis and Gary G. Koch, "The Measurement of Observer Agreement for Categorical Data," *Biometrics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, March 1977.

Table A.7. Percentage of Human and Artificial Intelligence Agreement for Sister-Service Interview Codebook

Focal Area	Verbatim Parent Code	Raw Accuracy, as a Percentage	Number of Excerpts Analyzed
Identity-development strategy	Tell	Not applicable ^a	Not applicable ^a
	Show	66.7%	18
	Do	71%	31
Trade-offs of a strong service identity	Positive Tradeoffs of a Strong Service Identity	65%	20
	Negative Tradeoffs of a Strong Service Identity	81%	21
Structural and environmental differences	Service Role Orientation	76.7%	39
	Values	72.7%	22
	Deployment	77.8%	27
	Mission	73.3%	15
Perceptions of the Air Force	Positive Impressions	76.5%	17
	Negative Impressions	71%	31
	Other Service Impressions	77.8%	27

NOTE: The minimum confidence level required for AI predictions was auto-set to 7 (out of a ten-point slider scale).

^a Represents an insufficient number of human-tagged excerpts for raw accuracy calculation.

Final Analysis and Synthesis Using Muse QDA

We used the chatbot function in Muse QDA to synthesize the data. The software did not let us query at the parent code level because of limitations on the volume of quotes it was able to process. We used the following questions, verbatim, to query our data on the child code level:

- What are the main themes emerging from this code?
- What are the main takeaways from this code?
- What are the top five themes in this code? Please provide two illustrative quotes of each theme.
- Please provide 10 quotes from different transcripts highlighting the range of perspectives in this code.

Literature on the Fundamentals of Identity

People define who they are in many ways—through their relationships, such as belonging to a family, or through their affiliations, such as being part of a profession or organization. These self-definitions are known as *identities*. A person’s identities can change over time, especially during key life events (e.g., joining the military, being deployed). Because identity is dynamic, the Air Force has an opportunity to deliberately strengthen each Airman’s connection to the organization as a whole while also reinforcing other important identities (e.g., career field, unit). To support this effort, we reviewed the academic research to understand the fundamentals of *professional identity* by walking through the 5Ws + H of identity: why identity is important, what identity is, where and when identity changes, who is involved, and how it forms within organizations (see Table B.1).⁶²

Table B.1. The 5Ws + H of Professional Identity

Question	Answer
Why is identity important?	Identity shapes how people think, feel, and act at work. It enhances job satisfaction, performance, and emotional attachment while also improving self-esteem and reducing stress, benefiting both individuals and the organization.
What is identity?	Identity is the answer to “who am I?” It reflects the reality that a person holds multiple roles that shift in importance depending on context, evolve as circumstances change, and sometimes fracture when conflicting identities create stress.
When and where does identity change?	Identity is most likely to shift during key transitions or significant life events that expose people to new roles, norms, expectations, or groups.
Who shapes identity?	Both an organization and the individual shape identity. Organizations influence through deliberate initiatives and unintended actions, while individuals strive to make sense of their thoughts and feelings within this evolving context.
How does identity form?	Identity forms through an iterative process in which an organization provides new ways for individuals to see themselves and individuals try new roles, interpret feedback, and create personal narratives that integrate their evolving identities.

⁶² In this report, *identity* refers to *professional identity*—that is, identity as it relates to one’s role and experience in the workplace, rather than personal identities held outside of work. Although we frequently use the shorter phrase *identity* throughout for readability, our focus remains on professional identity unless otherwise noted. Professional identity has been examined across multiple academic fields, including psychology, sociology, communication, organizational behavior, and management.

Why Is Identity Important? Identity Shapes How People Think, Feel, and Act at Work

Professional identity matters because it affects how people do their jobs.⁶³ Research shows that, when someone strongly identifies with their organization, it is good both for the organization and for themselves (as shown in Table B.2).

Someone who strongly identifies with their professional organization is more likely to have a more positive attitude about the organization, exhibit higher performance, be less likely to quit, and be healthier than those who do not identify as strongly.⁶⁴ People with strong professional identities also tend to have longer tenure, be older, and work in higher positions than other members of the organization.

⁶³ In the academic research, there are many terms that are related to professional identity, such as *organizational identification*, *organizational commitment*, *work engagement*, *job involvement*, *job embeddedness*, and *organizational culture*.

⁶⁴ Ng, 2015; Riketta, 2005; Riketta and van Dick, 2005; Steffens et al., 2017.

Table B.2. Positive Work and Individual Impacts of Having a Strong Professional Identity

Outcome	Positive Impact
Attitudes ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization and job satisfaction • Feeling of belonging in the organization • Pride and trust in the organization • Belief in and acceptance of the organization’s values
Performance ^b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High supervisor, peer, and self-ratings of main job responsibilities • Actions that benefit the organization that are not required for the job • Reduced absenteeism
Turnover intentions ^c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong desire to remain in the organization, regardless of stressors • Emotional attachment to the organization
Health ^d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-esteem and well-being • Social support • Reduced stress and burnout

^a Thomas W. H. Ng, “The Incremental Validity of Organizational Commitment, Organizational Trust, and Organizational Identification,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 88, June 2015; Eun-Suk Lee, Tae-Youn Park, and Bonjin Koo, “Identifying Organizational Identification as a Basis for Attitudes and Behaviors: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 141, No. 5, 2015; Marta Llorente-Alonso, Cristina García-Ael, and Gabriela Topa, “A Meta-Analysis of Psychological Empowerment: Antecedents, Organizational Outcomes, and Moderating Variables,” *Current Psychology*, Vol. 43, January 2024.

^b Michael Riketta, “Organizational Identification: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 66, No. 2, April 2005; Hannah Weisman, Chia-Huei Wu, Katsuhiko Yoshikawa, and Hyun-Jung Lee, “Antecedents of Organizational Identification: A Review and Agenda for Future Research,” *Journal of Management*, Vol. 49, No. 6, July 2023; Andrey V. Sidorenkov, Eugene F. Borokhovski, and Dmitry V. Vorontsov, “Associations of Employees’ Identification and Citizenship Behavior in Organization: A Systematic Review and a Meta-Analysis,” *Management Review Quarterly*, Vol. 73, June 2023.

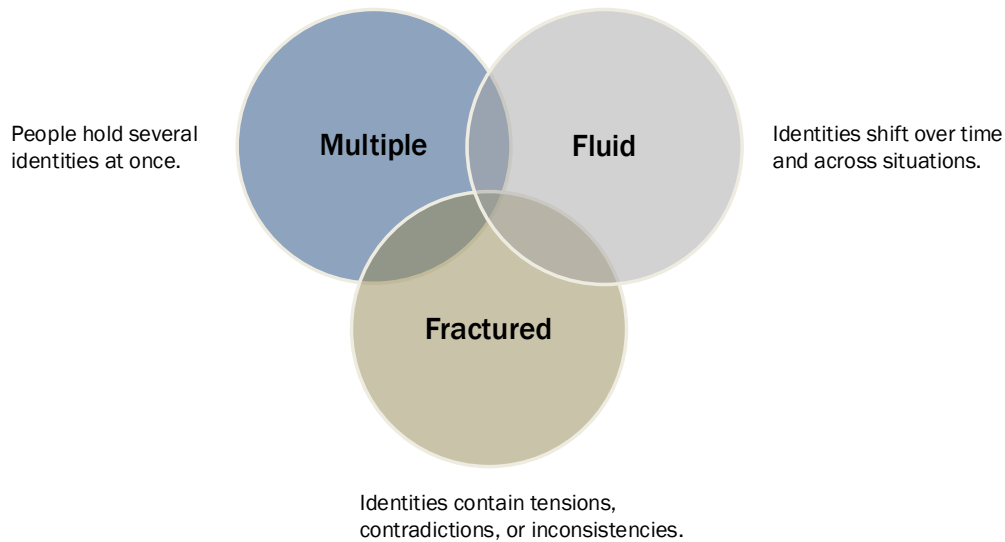
^c Michael Riketta and Rolf van Dick, “Foci of Attachment in Organizations: A Meta-Analytic Comparison of the Strength and Correlates of Workgroup Versus Organizational Identification and Commitment,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 67, No. 3, December 2005; Ying Zhong, Huan Ma, Cui-Cui Zhang, Qin-Ying Jiang, Jun Li, Chang-Ju Liao, Yu-Fen Liang, and Li Shu, “Professional Identity, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover Intention Among Chinese Novice Nurses: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *Medicine*, Vol. 103, No. 3, January 19, 2024; Vivien W. Forner, Djurre Holtrop, Edwin J. Boezeman, Gavin R. Slemp, Magdalena Kotek, Darja Kragt, Mina Askovic, and Anya Johnson, “Predictors of Turnover Amongst Volunteers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 45, No. 3, March 2024.

^d Niklas K. Steffens, S. Alexander Haslam, Sebastian C. Schuh, Jolanda Jetten, and Rolf van Dick, “A Meta-Analytic Review of Social Identification and Health in Organizational Contexts,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, November 2017; Lindsey M. Greco, Jeanine P. Porck, Sheryl L. Walter, Alex J. Scrimshire, and Anna M. Zabinski, “A Meta-Analytic Review of Identification at Work: Relative Contribution of Team, Organizational, and Professional Identification,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 107, No. 5, May 2022; Lorenzo Avanzi, Sebastian C. Schuh, Franco Fraccaroli, and Rolf van Dick, “Why Does Organizational Identification Relate to Reduced Employee Burnout? The Mediating Influence of Social Support and Collective Efficacy,” *Work and Stress*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2015.

What Is Identity? Identity Is the Answer to “Who Am I?”

Identity is how people understand who they are. Because people have many sides to who they are, different identities might compete. Figure B.1 illustrates the complexity of identity.

Figure B.1. The Complex Nature of Identity



SOURCE: This figure was inspired by Andrew D. Brown, “Identities In and Around Organizations: Towards an Identity Work Perspective,” *Human Relations*, Vol. 75, No. 7, July 2022.

A person has many roles in life, so they have multiple identities. For example, an Airman might be a leader, a teammate, a mentor, a technical expert, a spouse, a parent, a child, a sibling, and a friend all at the same time. The identity that is most present depends on the situation. While watching their child’s soccer game, an Airman is likely to identify most as a parent. But on a deployment, an Airman might be more likely to identify more as an Airman than as a parent because that role is foremost in the situation. This example contrasts personal and professional identities, but a person can also have different identities within the professional context. For example, an Airman might identify most with their technical specialty while in garrison. But in a joint environment, the same Airman may be more likely to identify as a member of the Air Force than with their technical specialty.

However, people can sometimes have trouble switching between different roles when their identities conflict, making identity *fractured*.⁶⁵ For example, an NCO might feel pulled in different directions by being a leader and a peer at the same time, which can cause stress, hesitation, or even disengagement when left unaddressed.⁶⁶ When identities conflict, the person might either focus on one identity over the other (e.g., focus on being a leader over being a peer) or place less emphasis on both identities (e.g., view themselves as not fully a leader and not fully a peer).⁶⁷ Finally, identity is *fluid* because, as life changes, how a person sees themselves also changes. An Airman may see themselves in new ways—and develop new identities—when they work in a new role, go on deployment, switch to a new career field, work under a new leader, have a child, get married, or get divorced.

⁶⁵ Blake E. Ashforth, Beth S. Schinoff, Kristie M. Rogers, and Donald Lange, “Being Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: Role-Based Identity Foils in Organizational Life,” *Organization Science*, Vol. 35, No. 1, January–February 2024.

⁶⁶ In the academic research, this is called *avoidance*.

⁶⁷ Ashforth et al., 2024. In the academic research, the former is called *compromise* and the latter is called *holism*.

Different Types of Professional Identity

There is more than one type of professional identity—a person can identify with their team, occupation, or organization or any combination of these. *Team identity* describes when a newcomer adopts their team's (e.g., unit's) goals and values as their own.⁶⁸ *Occupational identity* describes when someone defines themselves by the kind of work they do (e.g., career field).⁶⁹ *Organizational identity* is the extent to which someone shares an organization's (e.g., the Air Force's) enduring, central, and distinctive beliefs.⁷⁰ A person is likely to have more than one professional identity but might identify more strongly with one of these identities over the others. For example, an Airman might identify more with their career field than with being a member of the Air Force but still hold both identities simultaneously (as shown in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2).

The two types of professional identity that have been studied the most are team identity and organizational identity. Indeed, research has shown that people who identify with their team and their organization tend to have the highest job satisfaction, have the best team performance, are more receptive to change, and are most likely to benefit the organization in ways that are not required for their job.⁷¹ Few studies have investigated occupational identity. In those that have, there is evidence that occupational identity is associated with more benefits to the individual, such as career satisfaction, than to the organization.⁷²

It is important to note, however, that there are also drawbacks to each of these types of professional identity:

- When a person has a strong **team identity**, they might engage in unproductive behaviors if that behavior is common on their team (e.g., frequent absenteeism).⁷³
- When a person's **occupational identity** is stronger than—or conflicts with—their organizational identity (e.g., a career field that emphasizes autonomy in an organization with strict protocols), this can negatively affect their performance, well-being, and retention in the organization.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Danielle Cooper, Kevin M. Rockmann, Shora Moteabbed, and Sherry M. B. Thatcher, "Integrator or Gremlin? Identity Partnerships and Team Newcomer Socialization," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, January 2021.

⁶⁹ David M. Sluss, Robert E. Ployhart, M. Glenn Cobb, and Blake E. Ashforth, "Generalizing Newcomers' Relational and Organizational Identifications: Processes and Prototypicality," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4, August 2012; Blake E. Ashforth, Mahendra Joshi, Vikas Anand, and Anne M. O'Leary-Kelly, "Extending the Expanded Model of Organizational Identification to Occupations," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 12, December 2013.

⁷⁰ Blake E. Ashforth and Beth S. Schinoff, "Identity Under Construction: How Individuals Come to Define Themselves in Organizations," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 3, 2016; David A. Whetten, "Albert and Whetten Revisited: Strengthening the Concept of Organizational Identity," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2006.

⁷¹ van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000; van Dick et al., 2008; Jessica R. Mesmer-Magnus, Raquel Asencio, Peter W. Seely, and Leslie A. DeChurch, "How Organizational Identity Affects Team Functioning: The Identity Instrumentality Hypothesis," *Journal of Management*, Vol. 44, No. 4, April 2018.

⁷² Greco et al., 2022.

⁷³ Naomi Ellemers and Floor Rink, "Identity in Work Groups: The Beneficial and Detrimental Consequences of Multiple Identities and Group Norms for Collaboration and Group Performance," in Shane R. Thye and Edward J. Lawler, eds., *Social Identification in Groups*, Advances in Group Processes, Vol. 22, Elsevier Press, 2005.

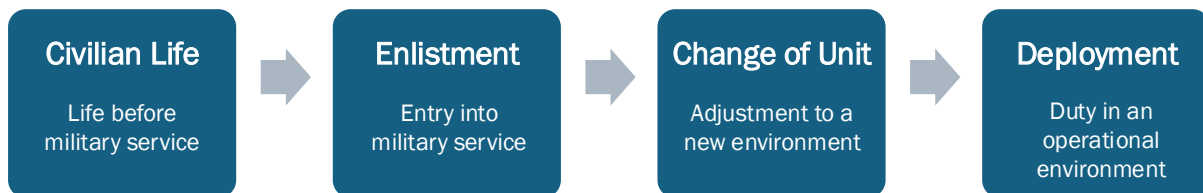
⁷⁴ Ostermeier et al., 2023; Hekman, Bingley, et al., 2009; Hekman, Steensma, et al., 2009.

- Finally, when a person has a strong **identification with the organization**, they might⁷⁵
 - experience strong negative emotions in response to negative organizational events (e.g., poor organizational performance, organizational scandals)
 - become a workaholic
 - behave unethically in ways they believe support the organization (e.g., covering up scandals)
 - demonstrate psychological entitlement (e.g., using company funds for personal gain)
 - reinforce, rather than challenge, other members’ point of view even when it is not credible and demonstrate strong bias against people who are not members of the organization
 - ignore or adapt too closely to key stakeholders’ perceptions of the organization.

Where and When Does Identity Change? Identity Is Most Likely to Change During Transitions

Although identity can change through day-to-day interactions, change is most likely during major life transitions. During these key events, people create new identities by thinking both about who they have been in the past and about who they want to become in the future. Figure B.2 provides examples of key events when an Airman’s identity is likely to change.⁷⁶

Figure B.2. When Identity Is Most Likely to Change



How easily identity changes during key events—such as those shown in Figure B.2—depends on the individual and their situation. If an individual already shares the organization’s values,⁷⁷ adjusting their identity usually feels natural to them.⁷⁸ But if an individual holds different values from those of the organization and must change to fit in,⁷⁹ adjusting their identity might be challenging for them.

⁷⁵ Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Dan V. Caprar, Benjamin W. Walker, and Blake E. Ashforth, “The Dark Side of Strong Identification in Organizations: A Conceptual Review,” *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 16, No. 2, July 2022.

⁷⁶ In the research literature, these times are called *episodes*.

⁷⁷ In the research literature, this is called *affinity*.

⁷⁸ Susanne G. Scott and Kellyann Berube Kowalski, “Self-Construction, Work Adjustment and Thriving at Work,” *International Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2011.

⁷⁹ In the research literature, this is called *emulation*.

These individuals might make more mistakes and need more support from leadership than someone who finds it easy to adapt their identity.

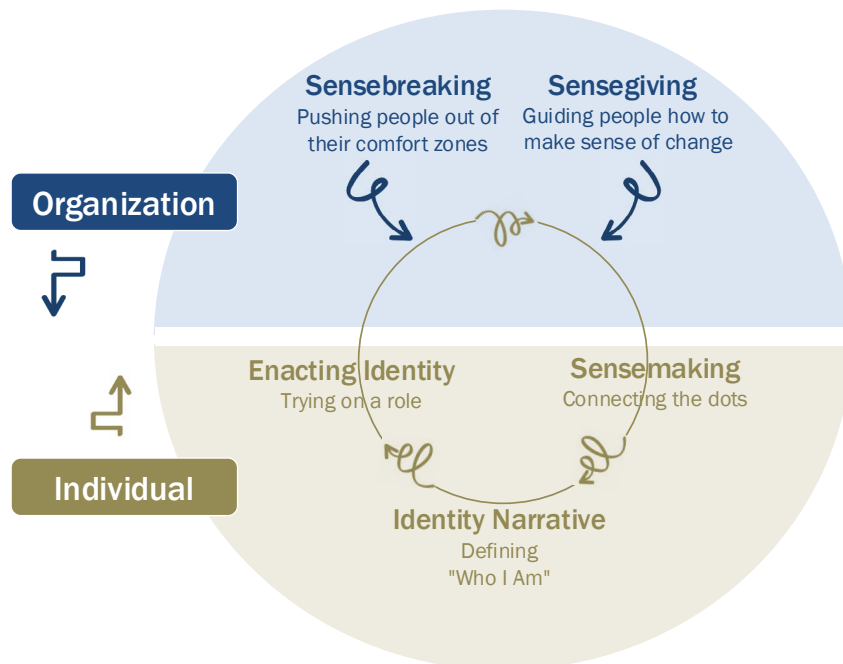
Who Shapes Identity? The Organization and the Individual Shape Identity

Both the organization and the individual have roles in shaping an individual's identity. That is, an organization engages in deliberate initiatives (e.g., policy), along with its unintended actions (e.g., leadership conduct), that collectively shape individual behavior and identity. At the same time, an individual works to make sense of their thoughts, feelings, and actions while also negotiating boundaries between their identity and the organization. For example, a leader who prioritizes technical expertise over other skills might intentionally or unintentionally encourage their subordinates to become—and identify as—technical experts because their subordinates recognize that technical expertise is what the leader values.

How Does Identity Form? Identity Formation Is a Process

As discussed already, identity emerges from the interplay of organizational influence and individual response. In this section, we discuss in more detail the specific mechanisms through which identity forms (see Figure B.3).

Figure B.3. A Simplified Process of Identity Formation



SOURCE: This figure was inspired by Blake E. Ashforth, Spencer H. Harrison, and Kevin G. Corley, "Identification in Organizations: An Examination of Four Fundamental Questions," *Journal of Management*, Vol. 34, No. 3, June 2008.

The Role of the Organization

The organization shapes the identity of its members through a process of breaking identity—called *sensebreaking*—and building identity—called *sensegiving* (shown in Figure B.3). Sensebreaking happens when the organization forces an individual to question who they are and reconsider their identity, such as having a recruit shave their head during basic training.⁸⁰ By contrast, sensegiving is when the organization encourages the individual to develop a new identity, such as by requiring uniform standards, performing courtesies and customs, and more.

Although the current effort emphasizes sensegiving, elements of sensebreaking are also present. We acknowledge this tension as valuable context but focus our efforts on practical initiatives the organization can implement, without drawing sharp distinctions between the two. Instead, we outline three general approaches—Tell, Show, and Do—which are designed to work in concert together to support identity formation. The specific initiatives within each pillar were covered in the main body of the report; however, we present the overarching framework here to establish its foundation. The framework was developed through a review and synthesis of prior literature spanning multiple academic disciplines. Our initial work served as an orienting baseline and was subsequently refined through data collection to ensure that it was appropriately tailored to the Air Force and would be practical in application (i.e., it was highly iterative). Table B.3 provides a brief description of these general approaches along with a few selected theories that contribute to a cohesive and integrative model.

⁸⁰ Sally Maitlis and Marlys Christianson, “Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward,” *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2014.

Table B.3. Approaches That Can Be Applied to the Air Force

Pillar	Core Focus	Purpose	Selected Relevant Theory
Tell	Establish shared understanding.	Connect members to the service’s mission, values, and heritage through purposeful communication and storytelling.	Narrative identity theory ^a Sensemaking theory ^b Framing theory ^c
Show	Make identity visible.	Reinforce belonging and pride through visible symbols, shared spaces, and role models that embody the service’s culture.	Organizational culture model ^d Cultural symbolism ^e Social learning theory ^f
Do	Build connection through action.	Strengthen unity and commitment through shared activities, challenges, and traditions that embody the service’s values.	Embodied cognition ^g Communitas theory ^h Collective effervescence ⁱ

^a McAdams and McLean, 2013; Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research*, Sage Publications, 2004.

^b Karl E. Weick, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and David Obstfeld, “Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking,” *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, July–August 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014.

^c Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Harvard University Press, 1974; Joep P. Cornelissen and Mirjam D. Werner, “Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis Across the Management and Organizational Literature,” *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2014.

^d Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., Jossey-Bass Inc., 2010.

^e Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973.

^f Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, Prentice-Hall, 1977.

^g Celia V. Harquail and Adelaide Wilcox King, “Construing Organizational Identity: The Role of Embodied Cognition,” *Organization Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 12, December 2010.

^h Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

ⁱ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields, Free Press, 1995.

The Role of the Individual

Rather than simply absorbing what an organization prescribes, the individual is an active participant in the process of identity formation. First, they try on the new role and *adopt* the new identity offered by the organization. Next, through a process of *sensemaking*,⁸¹ they interpret feedback from leaders, peers, and the environment while also assessing for themselves how well they fit the role. Finally, they construct an *identity narrative*—a personal story that weaves the new identity into their broader sense of self.⁸² For example, during basic training, a recruit will try on what it means to be a member of the Air Force when they learn the behaviors expected of their role (e.g., how to march and address superiors) and begin to develop the Airman identity. As they try on the Airman identity, the recruit will assess how well they fit in by seeing how their leaders and peers respond to them. The recruit might also think about their own successes and failures as a new Airman and further adjust to

⁸¹ Jean Helms Mills, Amy Thurlow, and Albert J. Mills, “Making Sense of Sensemaking: The Critical Sensemaking Approach,” *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, August 24, 2010.

⁸² Karen Foster, “Work, Narrative Identity and Social Affiliation,” *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 6, December 2012.

fit the role. Over time, the recruit begins to craft a new story about themselves—for example, shifting from “a civilian without discipline” to “a capable Airman in the Air Force.” In narrating this new story, the recruit demonstrates the adoption of a new identity.

Summary

Identity is how people understand who they are. A person can hold multiple identities across their personal and professional life roles. These identities can conflict with each other and change over time. Here, we focus on professional identity because it affects both the individual and the organization. Major transitions—such as enlistment, deployments, and changes in leadership—often serve as key points at which identities are likely to shift. Organizations shape identity by offering guidance about who their members are, such as by requiring new recruits to wear uniforms that emphasize belonging and shared meaning. The individual, in turn, responds by trying on the new role, assessing how well they perform in it, and ultimately constructing a new story about who they are.

Additional Qualitative Findings on Identity-Formation Practices Within the Sister Services and Air Force

Building on the findings presented in Chapter 3, this appendix offers a more detailed analysis of how organizations deliberately build members’ identities. We offer a practitioner-oriented framework (Table C.1, which reproduces Table 3.1 in Chapter 3), which combines evidence-based concepts from the academic literature (see Appendix B) with practical insights from our interviews with members from the sister services and the Air Force (see Appendix A for specific methodological details). The information in this framework is not new; however, it provides a simple synthesis for the Air Force context.

Table C.1. Instilling Identity: A Three-Pillar Framework (Tell–Show–Do) for Organizations

Pillar	Core Focus	Key Strategy
Tell	Communicate identity by providing orientation and meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear expectations. Share service history and lineage. Share personal stories and lessons learned. Connect individual contributions to mission.
Show	Make identity visible through tangible representations and examples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shape the physical environment. Symbolize identity through uniform, insignia, and regalia. Model the standard.
Do	Build identity through shared practice and action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in daily routines, rituals, and discipline. Embrace mission-related challenges. Recognize achievements and milestones.

The remainder of this appendix is organized around the pillars of Tell, Show, and Do. We begin by unpacking the key strategies of each pillar—defining its meaning and exploring its role in identity formation—drawing on insights from sister-service interviewees. Next, we consider how each strategy is currently implemented in the Air Force, using data from interviews with TTIs, MTLs, and

technical trainees.⁸³ Some repetition of key themes, tables, and quotes from Chapter 3 is intentional; it supports synthesis and comparison across identity-building mechanisms.

Tell: Communicate Identity by Providing Orientation and Meaning

The Tell pillar communicates—through both formal instruction and informal accounts—the expectations, language, history, and stories that shape identity while also explaining how each role contributes to mission success (shown in Table C.2).

⁸³ This is a preliminary evaluation intended to answer the following question: “How well is the Air Force doing in its efforts to instill identity during initial training, particularly BMT and technical training?”

Table C.2. The Tell Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lesson from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Set clear expectations	Communicate expectations directly and consistently—both spoken and in writing—to foster a shared view of ethos, history, standards, terminology, ranks, roles, customs, and rules.	Across services, early training prioritizes the communications of general expectations and values to lay the foundation for appropriate conduct.	BMT conveys essential values, rules, standards, and expected conduct. ✓
			Changes in terminology and appearance standards cause confusion and reduce buy-in. !
Emphasize service history and lineage	Tell stories of key events and traditions—past and present—that have shaped the organization’s identity, emphasizing the significance of collective achievements and challenges to inspire.	History typically plays an outsize role; facts, traditions, stories, etc. are routinely used to root members in their lineage, build pride, and instill deep purpose.	Although a few instructors and communities incorporate history, widespread efforts to harness history as a tool for cultivating an emotional connection to the service remain limited. !
Share personal stories and lessons learned	Encourage the sharing of personal stories that illustrate key concepts, including both successes and lessons learned from mistakes, to make identity more relatable and accessible.	Firsthand accounts are exchanged across the services to exemplify concepts and encourage each member to find their “why,” fostering trust and belonging.	Instructors share common challenges, lessons learned, and growth opportunities to illustrate the underlying reason behind actions and decisions, reinforcing a collective identity. ✓
Connect roles to mission success	Explain how different roles contribute to the overall mission, helping individuals see their place in the larger system and emphasizing the importance of collaboration.	Although making this link explicit and personalized is considered important in some services (e.g., Coast Guard), it was not as heavily discussed as other strategies.	Training introduces the importance of all roles with focus on how their career field contributes to the mission. ✓
			Fully embracing an enterprise perspective appears to be challenging. !

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention.

Set Clear Expectations

Organizational identity begins with understanding “how things are done here.” In this context, *expectation* refers to the spoken and written communication about service ethos, history, standards, terms, ranks, roles, customs, courtesies, and rules. When direct and consistent, expectations form the

foundation of identity.⁸⁴ According to our interviewees, the sister services communicate expectations through multiple channels, including handbooks, pocket guides, instructor remarks, and briefings, offering practical guidance on what to know, how to demonstrate it, and when it applies:

In recruit training or officer candidate school, we care that you learn to fire a rifle and that you learn basic military procedures, drills, and customs and courtesies and how to wear a uniform. Beyond that, we don't care about other things because you're going to get all that again when you go to your other schools. What matters is that you know the standards, prove that you can meet the standards, and show that you are committed to living up to those standards.—Marine Corps Veteran

Running Light [a handbook] covers various topics, like the history of the Coast Guard and the different types of assets the Coast Guard has. This includes the Coast Guard's mission, legal authorities, military customs and traditions, swab knowledge, and cadet life. It also addresses the chain of command, safeguards, and other basic military concepts.—Coast Guard Veteran

Air Force–Specific Observations

Basic Military Training Conveys Essential Values, Rules, Standards, and Expected Conduct

From the instructor's perspective, initial Air Force training clearly communicates Air Force expectations. Interviewees suggested that this training cultivates a mindset aligned with Air Force values and fosters a sense of duty, integrity, and commitment for service:

The Air Force prioritizes instilling those core values and that concept of military mindset. Like, "Hey, you are in the military now—there's a chain of command. You are no longer autonomous. You have responsibilities." I think BMT does a fairly good job introducing them to that Air Force culture and structure. Because structure is the core part that they need to maintain even while they go through our pipeline here.—TTI

We're creating these Airmen who, from BMT, learn how to be bare-minimum Airmen. You know the rules; you know what you're supposed to do; you know how to wear the uniform and how to carry yourself.—MTL

The trainees we interviewed generally shared instructors' perspectives, suggesting that they learned key concepts in training. They noted that instructors' straightforward and candid communication style strengthened their commitment to the Air Force values and expectations:

Our MTI would always tell us, "Always set yourself up for success . . . A lot of people judge you just off of your appearance. So, if they see strings and wrinkled shirts that can mean [to them that] you don't care about yourself."—Trainee, Materiel Management

⁸⁴ According to the model of *organizational identity dynamics*, one key mechanism that ties together organizational identity with an organization's culture and image comes from how organization members, especially those in key positions, express the organizational identity to others in the organization. In particular, when leaders express expected behaviors of subordinates, those subordinates learn how leaders perceive the organization's identity, which in turn influences the development of their own organizational identities. See Hatch and Schultz, 2002.

I like how blunt the instructors are. I like how deliberate and direct they are with things you need to work on . . . They call you out, and then they tell you how to fix it.—Trainee, Security Forces

Changing Terminology and Appearance Standards Cause Confusion and Reduce Buy-In

The introduction of new identity labels can confuse trainees, which can prompt uncertainty or disconnection from the broader Air Force mission. For example, as noted in the discussion in Chapter 2, the instructors we interviewed who said that they embrace the concept of Air-minded Warfighter might still discount relevant messaging because they perceive that it relies on meaningless jargon that shifts periodically:

Personally, I think, more than anything, it is buzzwords. As a service, we have become less war-minded than our sister services, because generally, we are less frontline. And I think the goal is to get us back to that mentality, and . . . [“Air-minded Warfighter”] is the phrase that has been chosen for [the warfighting mindset] . . . but to me, that phrase doesn’t mean much of anything.—TTI

I feel like [“Air-minded Warfighter” is] just another new cliché word or statement being thrown around . . . I’ve lived through a couple of them . . . The Air Force always changes it . . . Every four years, they want to change it up to something else, and nothing really resonates because it’s not perpetually maintained.—TTI

Some instructors we interviewed expressed frustration with shifting organizational priorities, often reflected in changes in appearance standards. Although many instructors expressed openness to change, they said that they wanted to understand how the change better positions the Air Force to pursue its mission:

Currently, we are going through so many changes—not all bad. Some are fantastic that needed to happen. But . . . why do we care about eyelashes? Why are we looking at that? . . . When you start nitpicking those small things, you get people that are like, “Well, I just joined and I don’t want to be here anymore.”—TTI

It just seems like . . . every time leadership changes, everything changes with it, and there’s no perpetuity. I understand that change happens. Things will progress, but there’s some stuff that changes all the time. And I’m like, how are we supposed to maintain consistency in standards whenever they keep flopping back and forth? How are you establishing identity if the core of it all, the foundation of it all, changes all the time?—TTI

Emphasize Service History and Lineage

According to our interviewees, connecting organizational history to purpose and practices contributes to building organizational identity.⁸⁵ When organizations share meaningful history, they define their core values and encourage members to feel like they are part of something larger than

⁸⁵ The intentional sharing of history, culture, and tradition is important across all military services, but it is especially pronounced in the Marine Corps, where interviewees indicated that it plays an outsized role—compared with the other strategies—in fostering a strong sense of identity.

themselves.⁸⁶ Many of our interviewees from sister services described narratives that orient them toward a consistent purpose and obligation of being a member of the service:⁸⁷

We are very heavy on learning our history. We know our birthday. We know why we have a blood stripe on our pants. We know the EGA [eagle, globe, and anchor] and what it means. . . . It's not just that we join the Marine Corps—we become part of its history. So, that sense of belonging, "Once a Marine, always a Marine." Learning our history is one of the most influential things that contributes to that.—Marine Corps Veteran

At my last unit, somebody was charged with doing Navy history once a month . . . It was super cool to give you a sense of the history and heritage and just being part of something that's gone on for hundreds of years.—Navy Veteran

Air Force–Specific Observations

Widespread Efforts to Harness History as a Tool for Cultivating Service Culture Remain Limited

Although a few instructors and trainees mentioned the use of Air Force history during BMT or technical training, our interviewees suggested that this training was infrequent or uninspiring:⁸⁸

If they could somehow introduce them to the history of the Air Force . . . I think that we [would] get better buy-in because then you would have that pride and that honor of you following in footsteps of other service members that have been before you and have a more realistic view of how serious this job can be.—TTI

I feel like, if we incorporated more history into the day to day, give it a little bit more lessons, it would build more of the Air-minded Warfighter.—TTI

I love saluting the flag and the national anthem. You go through the history and [are] taught we had a war over this . . . It's the meaning behind these words and symbols, but whenever you get here, it's like this circle means one team, one fight. This star means excellence in all we do. These three things are our core values. But who wrote that? Decided that? It's not inspiring. It's not genuine. Why is it this emblem? Why is it not a plane? That's our symbol. Why? What's the why behind all these things that I'm learning?—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

⁸⁶ An organization's communication of having values (the why behind what the organization does), practices (e.g., traditions, workflows, policies), and historical events that are distinct from those of other organizations increases members' motivation to identify with the organization because they can better distinguish themselves from those outside the organization. See Weisman et al., 2023.

⁸⁷ According to participant feedback, the extent to which historical narratives can shape service identity appears to depend on three elements: scope, cadence, and translation. *Scope* refers to the range of content presented, including service lineage (e.g., origins, campaigns, ethos), unit history (e.g., missions, deployments, local traditions), and specific exemplars (e.g., leaders, crews, decisive acts). *Cadence* relates to the frequency and timing of storytelling, such as monthly, quarterly, or event driven, which helps ensure that identity is consistently reinforced rather than limited to isolated events. *Translation* is about making identity actionable by connecting past episodes and exemplars to current tasks, standards, and decision criteria—so what "right" looks like is explicit, teachable, and repeatable under current conditions.

⁸⁸ In contrast, the use of personal stories—or experience-based narratives—was fairly common and is discussed in the next section.

Exceptions to using history as a method to instill identity include the occasional instructors and specific communities (e.g., Special Warfare) that present stories within the career field (as opposed to the larger Air Force). Trainees suggested that exposure to stories of past heroes and significant events reinforced their identity:

For Big Blue Air Force, there's not a huge appetite for all this heritage and stuff. But in Special Warfare, we go through all these stories of who's been in battle, who's done incredible things, who gave their lives. We do memorial push-ups for them. We carry rocks on all of our runs and rucks. We carry heritage logs for the fallen that come behind. The trainees don't go anywhere without them. We have a whole heritage warehouse filled with all the rocks from all the classes that came before them. Seeing what [the fallen have] done after they finish training and the fame and honor they brought into the career field with their actions is so motivating for the students to see.—TTI⁸⁹

We had one of the brothers of our fallen defenders come, and he did the push-ups with us, and his whole family was there. And we had the whole Security Forces tech school out there doing the push-ups together, and it just felt bigger. That was the first time that it hit me that, damn, we're doing these for a reason, and that just hasn't left me since.—Trainee, Security Forces

One reason for the limited use of history, as expressed by some instructors and trainees, is the focus on fallen combat warriors. This emphasis can inadvertently alienate a trainee from fully embracing their identity as an Airman, particularly if they do not see their future role reflected in those narratives:⁹⁰

Some stories were about people who went through war and held down the post so that everybody else could get back. Those are inspiring, but they're all Special Warfare stuff. There is nobody from cyber or anything like that because they don't really get any recognition. If you don't have that job, you're just looking at something that you're never going to do.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Share Personal Stories and Lessons Learned

Experience-based narratives (i.e., storytelling or sensegiving) provide an additional way to communicate expectations that are both approachable and relatable.⁹¹ The phrase *experience-based*

⁸⁹ The log carry is a Special Warfare community tradition to honor fallen members through physical endurance and remembrance. It symbolizes the weight of sacrifice and the resilience of those who serve. See, e.g., Andrew C. Patterson, "Memorial Log Carry for Special Warfare Training Wing Airman," Special Warfare Training Wing, U.S. Air Force, April 16, 2021.

⁹⁰ One example that could be used from a support specialty that was mentioned in our interviews was John Lee Levitow—a U.S. Air Force loadmaster in Vietnam who was the first enlisted Airman to receive the Medal of Honor. In 1969, his aircraft was hit by enemy fire, and a live flare began burning inside the cargo bay—seconds from igniting munitions onboard. Though badly wounded, Levitow crawled to the flare, hugged it to his body, and dragged it to the rear hatch, throwing it out just before it could explode. His actions saved the aircraft and all crew members. See Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "John Lee Levitow," webpage, undated.

⁹¹ *Narrative theory* argues that people's identities are based on the stories they tell about themselves. People make meaning of their past experiences and come to conclusions about who they are when they share stories with others in the same group (e.g.,

narrative generally describes senior colleagues (i.e., Airmen) sharing common challenges, lessons learned, and opportunities for growth over their career with junior colleagues. They seem to also spark a powerful thought: “By joining this community, I will one day have stories of my own and find my ‘why.’” Creating space for this kind of personal storytelling might encourage Airmen to share their perspectives, which opens the door to trust, mentorship, and belonging:

Just being around people who had served before you and just hearing their experiences and their stories inspired me as a leader. I want to be that person, that Soldier, that officer.—Army Veteran

When you’re a recruit, you have your petty officers in charge, [and] they’ll often tell you sea stories. I do remember being a recruit being like, “Wow, I can’t wait to do that” In boot camp, it’s sharing to inspire.—Navy Veteran

Air Force–Specific Observations

Instructors Share Common Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Growth Opportunities to Illustrate the Underlying Why Behind Actions and Decisions, Reinforcing a Collective Identity

Instructors routinely draw on narratives from their own experiences or those of their colleagues to foster identity, both as Airmen and as specialists in a particular career field. These stories often include examples of how they apply skills in the field.⁹² Others explain how they learned from mistakes. These narratives convey the deeper values and meaning of what it truly means to be an Airman:

I usually tell them my story. I tell them what I’ve seen and been through, what I have done in the Air Force That provides a deeper connection with the students because it’s a little bit more personal. I’m not just a robot up there when I’m instructing. But, “Hey, I’ve been in your shoes. I’ve been through this.”—TTI

The MTLs here like to share their stories. They share their values. They share their mental health struggles and how they overcame them. They try to level with the Airmen so that they can understand when we were young Airmen—it was okay to mess up as long as you would learn from it.—MTL

Trainees said that these stories helped them learn how to conduct themselves in their roles and developed their identity as Airmen:

It was the guy who did our parade practices and everything. And we did open ranks pretty badly. So, he shared a sad experience from when he was in Security Forces on the 911 operator. It was a senior Airman who was about to commit suicide. He got a call about it, and he froze in the moment. And he was telling us about how he could have saved his life, but he didn’t, because he couldn’t complete a simple task. That

unit, career field, installation, service branch). This process of building identity is not limited to individual stories. People also tell stories about the groups they are a part of, which gives meaning to the group’s history and purpose and reinforces group identity (in other words, “who we are”). See McAdams and McLean, 2013.

Service history and lineage showcase the military’s legacy, but those stories can sometimes feel intimidating because they are often extraordinary. See Appendix B for additional discussion of the role and importance of sensegiving in organizations.

⁹² We acknowledge that this category overlaps with the next, “Connect Roles to Mission Success.”

message was powerful, because procedures and little things are what save lives.—
Trainee, Aircrew Operations

I think learning about what our instructors have gone through—hearing that right from the person who’s seen it themselves—it makes your heart feel a little different than if you just read in a book.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

We were getting smoked one day—carrying each other up and down the grass—and one of our coaches said that we had a pitiful look on our face and to wipe it off. “It’s not about you; it’s not about your suffering.” And then started going on with a story about one of his friends that he went to combat with and what happens if one of your buddies is actually injured. I felt a little more connected to the mission [for Special Warfare] in that moment. It’s like, okay, this makes sense.—Trainee, Special Warfare

Connect Roles to Mission Success

Linking individual roles to the mission can help people see how their work contributes to the larger purpose, which encourages engagement and commitment.⁹³ For personnel further from direct execution (e.g., combat support or combat service support), these linkages clarify how their work enables mission outcomes; for personnel at the point of execution (e.g., combat arms), these linkages underscore how others support the mission. Our interviewees from the sister services emphasized that each service is an interdependent system, such that routinely linking roles to the mission reinforces purpose, accountability, and unity:

There is a constant recognition that, day to day, you’re actually doing something—you’re contributing to saving someone’s life or enforcing the law or whatever it might be. That is definitely a piece of the Coast Guard culture. And the other piece is there’s a lot of allowing junior people to do things. So you’re passing down the authorities, and you don’t have a lot of oversight. So that builds trust in the organization. The organization trusts you, so then you end up trusting the organization.—Coast Guard Veteran

When we were sailing around the Indo-Pacific, [the captain] tried to connect all 300 Sailors to the big mission of the ship so that you could continue to stay motivated and not just be like, “This inspection doesn’t really matter. Why do I have to get up at 5 a.m. and do my bed a certain way to shoot down a missile?”—Navy Veteran

⁹³ People understand who they are in the organization by recognizing how what they do contributes to the organization’s mission. Furthermore, people reinforce their organizational identity by talking about how what they do supports the organizational mission and by performing actions that—with this understanding—they know will have a positive impact on the organization. For more, see Joep P. Cornelissen, Ona Akemu, Jeroen G. F. Jonkman, and Mirjam D. Werner, “Building Character: The Formation of a Hybrid Organizational Identity in a Social Enterprise,” *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 5, July 2021. See also Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1984.

Air Force–Specific Observations

Training Introduces the Importance of All Roles with Focus on How One’s Career Field Contributes to the Mission

In our discussions, we commonly heard instructors noting that every position in the Air Force plays a vital part in advancing mission success and that no role is expendable. However, TTIs appeared to expand on the role of their particular career field to the Air Force mission and how that strengthens trainees’ sense of belonging and increases their motivation in both their training and their jobs:

With Materiel Management, I try to teach my students that it might not seem important what you’re doing, but it’s part of a bigger picture. You don’t know where the aircraft is going. That aircraft can be flying anywhere around the world, and that part that you just ordered that you don’t think is a big deal could be making the mission or breaking the mission If you don’t do your job right, it has ripple effects and can affect the big mission down the road.—TTI

I preach this to my students all the time Some people in finance can see someone in intel and they have all these “capture/kills” and that type of stuff. And [the finance people] say, “Oh, I just do money.” It’s like, yeah. But if you are an Airman—or you’re just a person in general—and you’re not getting paid, then you’re struggling to put food on your table. Are you going to be able to focus on that mission? No. Every aspect is needed to accomplish the mission. It’s just one piece in the larger wheel.—TTI

Trainees appeared to be internalizing the message, in that they were able to articulate how their roles contributed to the Air Force mission and expressing pride in their work:

As far as big, big picture, we secure the base so everybody can feel safe to do their job, so the maintainers can take care of the planes and the pilots can fly them and do the ultimate mission of the Air Force.—Trainee, Security Forces

Fully Embracing an Enterprise Perspective Appears to Be Challenging

Although there seems to be progress, as noted by our interviewees, additional efforts are needed to fully adopt an enterprise perspective,⁹⁴ both in training and at operational line units. Trainees, instructors, and MTLs alike shared wanting a deeper understanding of how their role—and others’ roles—contributes to the Air Force mission:

The common complaint for the majority of people I know in the Air Force who are outside of my kind of community [Special Warfare] is that they don’t really feel that useful. They don’t know what’s going on. For example, I have a lot of maintenance buddies, and they would just generate aircraft all day, every day. They had no idea what the mission was that the aircraft was going on. They didn’t know the context of why they’re doing it. And that’s a huge deal with the administrative people. They have no concept because no one tells them how they’re actually contributing. They’re just

⁹⁴ This approach conceptualizes an organization as a network of interconnected parts, encouraging individuals to recognize their roles within the larger framework, make decisions that support the mission, and genuinely appreciate the contributions of others.

patted on the back and told that they're doing great. I don't know if they're feeling that connection or they feel it's like patronizing where their role is overexaggerated to the point where they're like, "Yes, I don't believe anything you say."—TTI

I would say just trying to find a way to let the smaller agencies understand how their mission, their job relates to the overall [Air Force] mission. For example, with admin, they're behind a computer all day. They're working on performance reports and paperwork. I can see how they feel like their identity [is] overshadowed by maintainers or pilots.—MTL

We had one officer come in and it was pretty motivational because he was an F-15 fighter pilot . . . Him going out of his way and taking us out, showing us what we are actually doing and participating to the mission—that's pretty dang inspirational.—
Trainee, Materiel Management

However, some instructors questioned whether technical training was the appropriate setting to teach students how their roles contribute to the Air Force mission:

I think we should, as a collective, be teaching why this is important—why the Air Force needs firefighters, why they need intel specialists, why they need whatever the case may be. How does it affect the Air Force on the greater picture? . . . It's hard, because our sole focus is just "We're going to be firefighters. When you get to your next base, your permanent station, then that's their priority. It's on them to teach you that greater picture."—TTI Supervisor

Moreover, even trainees who said that they believed in this ideal admitted that it did not always work in practice, with some pointing out divisions within the Air Force and noting a status system that made certain roles appear more or less prestigious than others:

Some of what we have been saying reflects how we've been taught to speak and how we've been taught to express our feelings respectfully. But sometimes . . . I've been in situations where I've had a little bit of an ego. I don't know how to just eliminate that mindset like you are better because some of these other jobs aren't held to that same standard that we are. If we did apply that other standard, people don't get to the place they're supposed to go or get the support they need.—Trainee, Security Forces

Show: Make Identity Visible Through Tangible Representations and Examples

The Show pillar captures symbols worn (e.g., uniforms, insignia), displays in the environment, and traditions and behaviors that reflect the organization (as shown in Table C.3). These visible cues reinforce belonging and shared purpose in ways that extend beyond words or instruction.

Table C.3. The Show Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lessons from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Shape the physical environment	Use all spaces—training facilities, barracks, dining halls, and common areas—to emphasize history, values, and guidance, demonstrating discipline and care through maintained environments.	Consistently emphasized, everyday spaces exert a visual influence and require deliberate design, upkeep, and alignment with values and needs.	The training environment generally fosters pride and motivation through visual representations. Focus is often on career fields rather than on the Air Force identity and airpower.
Symbolize identity through uniform and insignia	Encourage the visible display of identity, tradition, and belonging by having members wear distinctive attire, badges, and honors—each symbolizing pride, discipline, and achievements.	Uniforms and insignia are invaluable, symbolizing identity and pride while reflecting service members' commitment and fostering a strong sense of belonging.	Members take great pride in their uniforms; OCPs are largely regarded positively. Dress blues receive criticism for resembling business attire and lacking uniqueness.
Model the standard	Ensure that those in authority visibly embody appropriate conduct, reinforcing excellence and authenticity, so junior personnel understand, “this is how it’s done here.”	Although making this link explicit and personalized is considered important in some services (e.g., Coast Guard), it was not as heavily discussed as other strategies.	Trainees noted instructors for exemplifying professionalism, respect, and commitment. Inconsistency in the modeling of appearance standards by some leaders undermines initial teachings.

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention.

Shape the Physical Environment

Physical environment refers to the everyday spaces where people work, train, and live, such as halls, classrooms, barracks, dining areas, memorial spaces, and digital screens. Participants noted that the content and condition of the environment signal what matters to the organization.⁹⁵ For example, members of the sister services shared these thoughts:

⁹⁵ Physical identity markers, such as decor inside the organization, communicate the uniqueness and status of members and of the organization itself. For example, the size and location of an office, the number of windows, and the quality of the furnishing communicate organizational prestige. Workplace decor can also provide repeatedly viewed visual cues about key qualities of the organization (e.g., past organizational accomplishments), which reinforce members' organizational identity. See Kimberly D.

When you get to a new unit, they always have their glory wall, and there's always somebody there that'll tell you about it.—Marine Corps Veteran

Every time you walk into the United States Coast Guard Academy, you walk over a crest [saying], "Who lives here reveres honor, honors duty." That is aligned with those core values and had been there a long time. So, that was a constant reminder of what you're doing.—Coast Guard Veteran

I think the simulated environments help, such as the simulated shipboard trainers or the weapons simulators. We have an M9 [pistol] simulation range for many recruits. When I went through officer training, we were told, "You'll never need to pick up a gun, so we're not going to waste any time in the curriculum on that." But when I was deployed, I did deploy with a weapon. Just having the familiarity with the weapon it was, "Hey, this is something we do in the military."—Navy Veteran

Air Force–Specific Observations

The Training Environment Generally Fosters Pride and Motivation Through Visual Representations

The Air Force environment is filled with reminders of the service's mission. Instructors and trainees gave several examples, such as buildings and streets named after historical Air Force figures or flight concepts, heritage displays, and the Air Force logo painted in giant lettering.⁹⁶ According to our interviewees, the physical environment shapes trainee identity and motivates trainees to excel:

I'm constantly buying things that have our logo and our sayings, as well as the Air force logos and Air Force sayings. And I give those out and put them everywhere.—TTI

When it comes to the facilities, we are very, very, very prideful. "This is what we do; look at us on the planes"—heritage everywhere . . . People do what's called legacy gifts, and they're all over the place.—MTL⁹⁷

Focus Is Often on Career Fields Rather Than on the Air Force Identity and Airpower

However, in many examples, the trainees and instructors we interviewed focused on specific career fields rather than on the Air Force as a whole:

For aircrew, there is an "85%" [painted] on the bottom of the staircase . . . It's sacred. You're not supposed to step on it because it's like bad luck. The "85%" represents our minimum . . . If we can't get 85 percent or more, we fail out. And that is one thing that we take pride in.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Elsbach, "Interpreting Workplace Identities: The Role of Office Décor," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 25, No. 1, February 2004.

⁹⁶ When visiting Joint Base San Antonio to conduct focus groups, we were able to see these visuals in person. This imagery and the pride they represented were both clear and inspiring.

⁹⁷ *Legacy gift* refers to planned giving via estate planning to benefit the Air Force, such as restoring or preserving a historic site. See, for example, First Air Force One Foundation, "Planned Giving," webpage, undated.

There's memorabilia everywhere . . . If you go up into even their barracks on the third floor, they have murals of SR [special reconnaissance], of TACP [tactical air control party]. They have a bunch of stuff that students have left behind, logs, and even our weights have each of our CCTs [combat controllers] Wherever you go, you know you're in that bubble of Special Warfare.—TTI

We have pictures of cyber warfare operations and people that did things and stuff like that just to saturate them with that. Saying, "Hey, you're stepping into this realm that only a few people can command."—TTI

Trainees noted that seeing Air Force–specific imagery or artifacts (e.g., planes) made them feel a part of something larger than themselves. Trainees and instructors alike said that having more of these representations or experiences (e.g., flying in a plane)⁹⁸ would strengthen their connection the Air Force and their Airman identity:

Seeing all the decommissioned planes on the parade field with the little emblems of bombs and things reminds you of just what the Air Force really is about—planes, close air support, things like that.—Trainee, Special Warfare

When people think of being in the Air Force, they think they're going to be closely associated with flight line stuff, airplane stuff. And a lot of people don't have those opportunities. That is one of the ways that I've seen people be excited again to be in the Air Force is that they've had a chance to ride in a military aircraft.—TTI

Symbolize Identity Through Uniform and Insignia

Uniforms, insignia, and regalia are visible markers of identity, tradition, and belonging.⁹⁹ Participants indicated that what might seem like simple symbols reflect pride and commitment to the armed services and the Air Force. According to our interviews with people in the sister services, the effort, discipline, and sacrifice required to wear them is what gives these symbols their power, making them indicators and reminders of their hard work:

The uniform—more than anything in terms of physical symbols or whatever—makes you feel like you are a Sailor. For example, I had one job in the Navy where I didn't

⁹⁸ Not everyone has the opportunity to work around aircraft, but one Airman reflected on their memorable experience flying on a military C-130 during temporary duty. They described it as the highlight of their career, feeling immense pride just being on the aircraft. They expressed a desire for more Airmen to have similar experiences earlier in their careers, stating that such opportunities could significantly enhance their connection to the Air Force. If resources were limitless, they said, this would be their top priority.

⁹⁹ Organizational artifacts, such as uniforms, are material markers of an organization's identity. These artifacts represent not only the organization but also the core values (the why behind what the organization does) and principles of the organization. For example, a military uniform establishes a shared appearance, signaling membership in the armed forces and shaping how service members see themselves and are seen by others. Insignia—such as patches, rank markings, and qualification pins—quickly communicate roles, skills, and affiliations, telling the story of what someone has achieved and where they belong. Regalia, including medals, ribbons, and ceremonial dress, carry the weight of honor and tradition, often reserved for moments of recognition or formal occasions. Individuals develop a sense of belonging when they see and wear these sorts of organizational artifacts. For more on how organizational artifacts relate to organizational identity, see Lee Watkiss and Mary Ann Glynn, "Materiality and Identity: How Organizational Products, Artifacts, and Practices Instantiate Organizational Identity," in Michael G. Pratt, Majken Schultz, Blake E. Ashforth, and Davide Ravasi, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

have to wear a uniform. It was part of the CNO, the Chief of Naval Operations' strategic studies group, which was at the Naval War College. And we got to wear civilian business clothes or whatever for our various engagements. And that made me feel really disconnected.—Navy Veteran

It was when we had to be in our uniforms and I went out and people looked at you differently. And it wasn't that people didn't like it or respect it, but you did get looked at differently. And I felt like, "Okay, I'm a Soldier," and I was proud to wear the uniform. At that point, I knew I was in. I was all in.—Army Fellow

In the Navy, you get warfare pins, and your pin represents being a subject-matter expert in a certain area of warfare. So, whether it's surface, air, expeditionary, submarine, or information warfare, once you accomplish a lot of training, testing, and boarding, you are awarded a pin and then you wear that on your uniform every day. When I got to the fleet, at my first command, I remember it being a really, really, really big deal when people were getting pinned because it was not one of those things where everyone could get it.—Navy Veteran

Air Force—Specific Observations

Members Take Great Pride in Their Uniforms (and Insignia), with the Operational Camouflage Pattern Being Viewed Positively

Our interviewees reinforced the critical role of uniforms in fostering a sense of belonging. More than just clothing, they said, it represents shared identity, discipline, and pride in service. The expectation of wearing a well-presented uniform underscores its symbolic weight: It projects professionalism and reminds Airmen they are part of something greater than themselves:

Every day I put the uniform on. That tells me that you're a shred different than anybody else. You have this uniform for a very specific reason, and I think that is the purpose behind the uniform. It's an identity.—TTI

When we're doing PT and in PT gear, it doesn't feel as connected . . . Whenever we're in uniform . . . I feel like I'm an American.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

When it comes to Air Force—specific uniforms, perspectives were more nuanced. Although Airmen generally expressed appreciation for OCPs for their versatility, comfort, and practicality, some said that they were too similar to the Army uniform, which did not support an Air Force—specific identity or sense of pride:

When I was putting my OCPs on, I felt like I was part of the Air Force. I felt so good about myself. I'm putting my pants on, my OCP shirt, my blousing. I'm zipping it up and I'm doing my wrists and stuff like that—and lacing up my boots. I just felt like I'm in the military now. Now, is it the Air Force uniform? No. I felt like I was in the Army.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Interestingly, interviewees said that the *flight suit* balanced the Air Force's aviation heritage and practicality for everyday use. That said, the flight suit is also associated with only specific occupational roles, though, which could prompt division:

The one-piece flight suit. When I see that, I get excited. Because it doesn't just look cool—it's super functional and it's a symbol.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

For symbols to carry significance, they must feel genuine—either emerging organically from the community or rooted in history. This means that trainees must understand the symbolism and lineage behind logos or insignia to inspire pride and meaning. As this and previous quotes illustrate, there are mixed reactions to Air Force symbols:

We love our green feet lightning bolt. You'll see it on a lot of the water towers around here, and they have one on the ground right outside the door. It's on the side of this water bottle right there. It's the jolly green feet for the PJs [pararescue jumpers] and the lightning bolt for the other three career fields—Special Warfare. Is it an official or unofficial logo? I don't know.—Trainee, Special Warfare

Earning an insignia—whether name tape, a patch, a rank, or a specialty badge—reflects effort and commitment to overcome challenges. Although some insignia are worn by all Airmen, others are specific to particular career fields (e.g., berets).¹⁰⁰

Dress Blues Receive Criticism for Resembling Business Attire and Lacking Uniqueness

Concerns about the Air Force dress blues also emerged, indicating that they are uncomfortable and not particularly distinctive. Many also expressed that these uniforms are less visually appealing than those of other branches, such as the Marine Corps:¹⁰¹

I would say, [the Air Force's] uniforms aren't the best . . . You're wearing a business jacket. Are you a warrior? Or are you a businessman?—Army Veteran

I think our blues could look better. When I put them on, I sometimes think I look like a flight attendant.—Trainee, Security Forces

I understand [the blues are] supposed to be professional. You use that at ceremonies and stuff like that. I would 100 percent agree with it. You should have a different uniform for that. You should look cleaner. You should look nicer. But it's just—I don't know. I look at Marine Corps blues . . . They look so much sharper than the Air Force [blues]. It's just, "You look better than me."—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Model the Standard

The actions, not just statements, of leaders are highly influential teachers. Leaders—drill instructors, NCOs, and commanders—make the standard visible (e.g., "how we act here") by their

¹⁰⁰ We introduce the concept that difficulty gives meaning to symbols, although this theme is explored in greater depth in "Embrace Mission-Related Challenges" later in this appendix.

¹⁰¹ Although this point did not surface directly in our interviews or focus groups, an exploratory review of Reddit threads suggests that the dress blues carry a negative reputation, in part because of their use as punishment in tech school, which undermines pride and morale. As discussed further in "Recognize Achievements and Milestones" later in this appendix, some trainees expressed how meaningful it was for them to "dress up" and celebrate in a way that felt unique to the Air Force during ceremonies. However, they noted that these events were infrequent.

decisions, time use, language, and enforcement.¹⁰² When leaders' words and actions align, subordinates develop trust. In contrast, a gap between what leaders say and what they do can severely undercut trust and reduce a willingness to comply, especially when outside the training environment. Members of the sister services offered the following:

When you are one of the leaders in that [basic training] environment, your job is to be a model and to always model the standards and the behaviors that you're trying to inculcate in the recruits or the officer candidates. So, we had a saying down at the recruit depot, and that was "You're always on parade." Meaning, "You're always being looked at whether you think you are or not. And it's not by your bosses. It's by the recruits. And the recruits have an expectation." So, my physical fitness, my uniform, my bearing was never as precise and as tight as it was when I was in that particular environment.—Marine Corps Veteran

There's something about being in—excuse my language—but being in a shitty situation and your boss is in it with you—like morning formations. It makes you feel like you're actually part of a team. It's not just *saying* that you're a team, it *is* a team because it sucks for everyone. Mentorship is really big.—Navy Veteran

The biggest thing you can do to reinforce culture, particularly on the enlisted side, is have your midlevel or senior-level enlisted walking the walk, talking the talk . . . If you're led to believe that that was all boot camp bullshit . . . then you start wondering, what else were they lying to me about?—Coast Guard Veteran

Although leaders set the standard, peers can further amplify or dilute these standards and model what they observed from their leaders:

I told this lady that I'm not getting a lot of guidance from my commander. And she's like, "Well, you need to find peer mentors. They are roughly the same rank—such as a Captain—but they're a more senior Captain, and they'll teach you" . . . They made it their mission to mentor me.—Army Fellow

Air Force–Specific Observations

Trainees Noted Instructors for Exemplifying Professionalism, Respect, and Commitment

Trainees repeatedly described how instructors affected how they understand what it means to serve in the Air Force. When instructors balanced professional distance with respect and genuine connection,¹⁰³ the trainees we interviewed said they inspired them and reinforced what it means to be an Airman:

I think it just goes back to actions speak a lot louder than words. Anybody can get up to teach a class . . . how they're living—it's always going to speak louder than just telling us how to do something.—Trainee, Special Warfare

¹⁰² Authority figures represent a highly influential reference point for comparison in organizations. Subordinates compare an authority figure's behavior with their own behavior and develop an organizational identity that is aligned with how the authority figure's behavior represents the expectations of the organization. See Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016.

¹⁰³ The military context requires clear boundaries and, arguably, instructors must maintain a degree of distance—even coldness—as part of shaping identity.

You really start to look up to certain instructors who, in the moment when you are doing the things that they're telling you to do . . . it seems horrible, but then you realize that they're trying to make you into a teammate that they would want to work with one day . . . Once you understand that, you can really start to appreciate all of the things that you've had to endure. They're never really taking things out on you.—
Trainee, Special Warfare

There's this little paper that your MTI gives you—like your report card for BMT. Our MTI stapled ours up and told us we weren't supposed to read it until tech school. When I opened it, there's a remarks section at the bottom. It was all the MTIs that worked with our flight sat down and as a group, wrote about each person personally. Hearing the words that they spoke about me and how I was throughout BMT and how they feel I have potential to end up having a good career meant a lot.—Trainee, Materiel Management

Trainees most commonly said that MTIs or TTIs were their role models; however, they also said that brief interactions with high-ranking leaders were impactful:

One time, I was doing details and a brigadier general came around [with another high-ranking officer] . . . They were just talking to us like we were human . . . no matter what our rank is or what our profession [is].—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Air Force instructors also described the importance of treating trainees with respect and as up-and-coming professionals, which encouraged trainees to work hard, excel in their roles, and commit to the Air Force. Many instructors also talked about being a good example of Air Force standards and values:

They definitely look. They definitely watch. I think that's really important. Even being outside, the anthem goes off, letting them see us not try to hurry and run off to our car. Instead, actually stop and do the proper customs and courtesy.—MTL

For instructors, we try to make sure that we present the best form of ourselves when we are around the students. We try to show them that, "Hey, you have to have restraint whenever you're making difficult decisions. You can maintain decorum, professionalism, and respect."—TTI

You will never see me with a uniform infraction or messy hair. Because that standard of professionalism and how we carry ourselves is what I want them to see from me. And I take that into how I carry myself with the Airmen. If they have to go sweep or mop or do PT, I'm going to be out there with them doing it as well so that they know I'm not just telling you to do something to do it—I'm showing that I will do it too. What that effect has on them, I don't know. But I'm prideful in that I never want to be a lazy example for an Airman.—MTL

Role modeling is very hard. There's so much transparency, and, in some cases, people who we used to put on a pedestal are not who we thought they were.—TTI

Inconsistent Modeling of Appearance Standards by Some Leaders Undermines Initial Teachings

Instructors and trainees also described seeing leaders who did not maintain appearance standards, such as ensuring uniform compliance and physical fitness. A trainee seeing a leader who does not follow Air Force standards can undermine what was taught in BMT as well as Air Force values:

For a lot of these Airmen, this [tech training] is their first time ever meeting or seeing somebody in this career field and the Air Force, aside from an MTI. Sometimes it feels like we're putting up the wrong people into these first-glance positions. An instructor who maybe shaves every other day or looks like they're about to be busting the seams in their uniform, that sort of thing. To me, that distances those Airmen from feeling like they're in the Air Force.—TTI

Do: Build Identity Through Shared Practice and Action

The Do pillar reflects how identity is built through participating in daily routines, overcoming challenges, and marking milestones. These shared experiences enforce values, foster discipline, and create lasting connections between members (Table C.4).

Table C.4. The Do Pillar: Key Strategies

Strategy	Description	Lessons from Sister Services	Preliminary Assessment of Air Force Initial Training
Build habits, routines, and discipline	Regularly enforce completion of tasks to standard, such as physical fitness; conduct teamwork exercises; and adhere to protocols to foster discipline and commitment.	Routine activities are fundamentally important because they demand adherence to standards and foster camaraderie through collective effort.	Trainees appreciate daily routines to build discipline, camaraderie, and purpose. ✓ Inconsistency in enforcement of appearance standards suggests that some standards are optional. !
Embrace mission-related challenges	Design, foster, and guide individuals through difficult situations testing fortitude and preparing them for current and future demands while building Airman resilience, camaraderie, and shared purpose.	Hardship is considered central to military training and culture because enduring challenges builds resilience, forges bonds, and fosters belonging and identity.	Challenges are essential, and the PACER FORGE concept is viewed as promising. ✓ PACER FORGE Provisional does not provide sufficient responsibility to every recruit and clear ties to the Air Force mission. !
Recognize achievements and milestones	Intentionally acknowledge key events—both personal and collective—to highlight important contributions and encourage the internalization of their significance.	Meaningful celebrations, planned and spontaneous, provide key moments to reflect on achievements, honor heritage, and strengthen pride.	Trainees noted that meaningful moments of recognition in BMT enhanced their sense of belonging. ✓ Some interviewees expressed a desire for more-relevant celebrations to enhance morale and identity. !

NOTE: Based on the data collected in this effort, ✓ signifies generally effective performance or progress, while ! highlights areas that might need attention.

Build Habits, Routines, and Discipline

Participants described how routine, job-related activities—especially in BMT—were a key avenue that develops identity. Some examples include group PT, drilling, cadences, and inspections.¹⁰⁴ These

¹⁰⁴ *Embodied cognition* refers to the idea that a person’s bodily experience within an organization influences their organizational identity. *Bodily experience* describes tacit, nonverbal knowledge gained through habits and routines, such as making the bed every morning, arriving on time, performing daily PT, and addressing superiors in the same way. These habits and routines ingrain a person’s understanding of the organization’s identity in a nonverbal way and strengthen their own identification with the organization as they perform bodily activities that reinforce it. See Harquail and King, 2010.

activities not only instill values and teach service history but can also build essential skills and foster camaraderie. When paired with explanation, such as cadences, creeds, and mottos, these routines and rituals can reinforce the underlying purpose and add meaning to tasks that might otherwise feel mundane. Importantly, these activities shape identity not only through repetition but also by requiring service members to consistently perform to established standards, emphasizing excellence and discipline in every action. Members of the sister services offered the following:

In the context of initial entry training and identity-building, that's what all that formation time is. It's just checks on learning the things you were supposed to learn from the day before. Did you put your uniform on the right way? Did you do all the things you were supposed to do before you came out here? If not, how are you going to correct that behavior in the future?—Army Fellow

You learn the basics in your entry levels when you learn how to maintain your weapons, how to maintain yourself, and just being able to ensure perfection at those basics so that you can build upon that.—Marine Corps Veteran

The more we did these tasks, the more ingrained that these tasks became, the easier these tasks became, which then allowed the instructors to progress further . . . to learn more of the history, to learn more of the reasons why we're doing this . . . the more we started to feel like, okay, we're part of something bigger, and it's worth what we're doing.—Army Veteran

Morning formations, physical training, endurance course, and then the obstacle courses. Just learning to trust one another and actually trust our leadership . . . As you listen and long as you are doing the right things, then you'll have great results.—Marine Corps Veteran

One of their rituals was we sing the Marines hymn every morning. So, from the beginning, we started learning our song.—Marine Corps Veteran

Air Force—Specific Observations

Trainees Appreciate Daily Routines, Even Annoying Ones, to Build Discipline, Camaraderie, and Purpose

In our interviews with Air Force personnel, instructors and trainees shared that daily routines and rituals help Airmen understand their role, learn proper behavior, stay motivated, and feel like they are part of something larger than themselves. For example, even simple tasks reinforce discipline, camaraderie, and purpose:¹⁰⁵

I see making my bed properly in the morning as me setting myself up for an easy success to start the day. I can tackle everything else more proper. It's a small thing that got hammered into me.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

¹⁰⁵ Performing mundane duties to a high standard reinforces excellence as a core value. Working in teams develops camaraderie, while symbolic practices—such as saluting and showing respect to superiors—deepen connection to the military and the Air Force.

We're in the military, so there's customs, courtesies, standards that they set on us, and we're expected to keep it.—Trainee, Materiel Management

Whenever that national anthem goes off, I'm in uniform, and I got to salute it, I love that. I absolutely love that. . . . It just feels so American to be doing that And I know some people hate it. That's something that makes me feel like I'm a part of something.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

And then before we start each class, we do the—not the Air Force core values, but the Airman's Creed. So, before class starts, they do the Airman's Creed.—TTI

Instructors reported that, to ensure that tasks are performed as intended, they monitored and corrected trainees who did not meet Air Force standards:

We do like to show up at the hospital unannounced to see who is representing the Air Force well, whether it's wearing it [their uniform], their hair, or other personal grooming standards—are where they need to be. Especially on night shift. We always want to make sure that we look the part. And then little things like showing up on time, not disappearing, always doing their best, having a good attitude, those types of things. Making sure that they know you're not the same as the civilian nurse. You are held to a higher standard.—TTI

We call it *progressive discipline*. The first time I see them when that's [sic] out of uniform or something's wrong, "Oh, hey, this is not okay. Read this chapter, whatever. Fix yourself." It happens again, and that's when they start working on paperwork because it's showing blatant disrespect.—TTI

Trainees generally appeared to appreciate these corrective actions, recognizing that the discipline served a clear purpose in helping them meet Air Force standards and prepare for future responsibilities:

MTIs knew when to turn on their game face and yell at us and make sure that we're in line. Then at the same time, they knew when to calm down a little bit because a leader really has to know when to be a friend versus be a leader. I think the MTIs were perfect at doing that.—Trainee, Materiel Management

It was about like the seventh week in BMT, and we didn't meet the standard. So, our MTI brought us into a room, and he gave out his emotions. Normally you're not supposed to do that—go into their personal lives—but he was willing to give us that—make you feel human, because he wanted us to feel part of it. He then [had us all write] about ourselves. And that night the MTI went and he read all of them, and I came in the next day and my MTI was telling me all the stuff that he read about me. And I was like, oh my gosh, he actually read all of this. I was just so amazed how much they care for everybody and how much everybody tries to make you feel welcomed here.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Inconsistency in Enforcement of Appearance Standards Suggests That Some Standards Are Optional

However, some trainees and instructors raised concerns that not all MTIs and TTIs consistently enforced all the standards. A leader's failure to enforce standards can create the impression that some standards are optional:

In BMT, a lot of MTIs, you get to your fifth, sixth week, you're about to graduate, you're done on PACER FORGE, you're going home—they kind of relax. They start playing music and let you do your thing. My MTI stayed very disciplined, and he showed us the entire time what it looks like to be in his position and to lead people. I was very impressed because a lot of the other ones were just like, "Yeah, cool, I don't care anymore."—Trainee, Security Forces

I want to emphasize the way that we're in the military—it's different from decades ago. We're getting away from being a military and more like being a business. Nowadays, an Airman will walk around with AirPods even if they can't have them. They'll have hair out of regs, and no one says anything. I will say stuff, but there's only so much I can say. I used to yell out for years, but there's no point now because, if their senior leadership's okay with it, there's nothing I can do about it. We don't expect our Airmen to rise to the standard anymore.—TTI

We heard several possible reasons for these inconsistencies, including frequent changes in standards, too heavy of an emphasis on the individual, and discomfort with confrontation:

Some [supervisors enforce standards for TTIs]. Some of them don't. It's just a matter of personality. They're not very confrontational. Because at the end of the day, to be an instructor, you have to be an NCO. It's one of those things where we're all adults here, we should be able to take care of ourselves. And a lot of people across the board don't want to have to deal with other people.—TTI

Embrace Mission-Related Challenges

Participants consistently identified hardship as central to initial military training and culture. Enduring and successful completion of demanding challenges—whether harsh conditions, difficult exercises, or collective adversity—serves as a rite of passage that tests limits, builds resilience, and forges bonds.¹⁰⁶ When infused with meaning, these “embrace-the-suck” moments create belonging and identity.¹⁰⁷ Members from sister services we interviewed shared the following:

¹⁰⁶ The concept *communitas* suggests that certain life events are transformative and promote social cohesion that transcends social status. These life events can include crises, rites of passage, and other major life events. For example, when members of an organization go through critical challenges at work in a team (e.g., combat experiences, particularly difficult training exercises), they develop camaraderie and increased identification with the organization. See Turner, 1969.

¹⁰⁷ Additional examples of meaningful hardship experiences include singing the service's anthem during gas mask training, taking long hikes named for an important struggle and victory in the service's history, or experiencing group punishment in which recruits realize how their actions affect the team.

Nothing pulls people together and makes them feel integrated like adversity. So, all the crap they put you through. It matters. It sort of works. I hate to admit it.—Navy Veteran

I actually think it's a good thing. . . . those things that aren't fun in the moment but build character and cohesion. Because at the end of the day, the military has to have people who are willing to go through some form of misery to do the things that we require them to do. It's actually a test. When you experience those things that are really tough with people to your left and right, you build really strong bonds with them, which is at least part of the Soldier experience for me There's an identity to it.—Army Veteran

The Marine Corps prides itself on being able to operate in harsh and austere conditions—there's always the embrace-the-suck kind of mindset. So, if it's raining or if it's cold or if it's hot, that is when the instructors seem to get most excited about going to do things. When you're on your fourth day of sitting in the cold rain, then you start to really decide that you want it.—Marine Corps Veteran

At first, I was pretty normal—like, that's impossible, I can't do it. But after a while, I learned that, if we work together and we keep doing our best, it builds confidence and a belief that I can do a lot more than I originally thought.—Marine Corps Veteran

The initial training process often culminates into an event representing the transition into military service. However, of shared hardships that bind service members together and reinforce identity, pride, and connection to the force throughout a career, one veteran said,

There is a training exercise called *the crucible* It's about 48 hours long. You don't sleep. It's a number of different physically taxing exercises that require teamwork. And it ends with this climb up this hill at Camp Pendleton close to San Diego. It's 700 feet, but it's fairly steep. It's a lot of elevation really quickly. You got to make it up that hill. And at the very top, they form you all up. And then your drill instructor calls you a Marine for the very first time. Going into it, I was very skeptical of the entire thing. I was like, this sounds hokey, but, by the time you get there, I absolutely believed it. I can definitely point [at] that [as] the first time I felt like a Marine.—Marine Corps Veteran

On the officer's side, you do your time on the Coast Guard Cutter *Eagle*, which is the three-masted giant sailing ship Everybody will do at least a week on the *Eagle*. And when you do that, it's like, okay, now this all makes sense. Why they're having us do push-ups, learn culture, memorize stuff, be up at crazy hours, and do the obstacle course is because we are now working as a team. . . . Now I feel like a Coastie.—Coast Guard Veteran

Air Force—Specific Observations

Challenges Are Essential, and the PACER FORGE Concept Is Viewed as Promising

Air Force trainees described, like sister-service members did, the pride they felt after challenging moments or events. Overcoming difficult tasks helped them feel that they had “earned” their position as Airmen:

When we accomplish those rucks or as we graduate tech school and as we graduate BMT, I think that's when we feel it the most. We actually are accomplishing [something], and we proved ourself to be worthy.—Trainee, Security Forces

It's one of the last events that you do at PACER FORGE, and you're carrying this briefcase. At the time, we didn't know what was in it, but it weighed . . . maybe 70 pounds, and it has these weird handles, . . . so you have to pick it up in a weird way . . . We carried it all the way around PACER FORGE, which must have been three, three-and-a-half miles, four miles . . . We opened it up, and at the bottom, it was sandbags . . . But on top of those sandbags, it was the Air Force patch, which signifies the heavy burden of the Air Force that [is being bestowed on us]. And ever since we got that, I felt like we were actual Airmen. We passed the test. Carrying the heavy burdens around the whole PACER FORGE, and that was a reward, saying that we can do it, and we're ready to take on the challenge.—Trainee, Materiel Management

Generally, instructors expressed broad approval of the concept (describing it as a “big step”), and trainees said that they had found the experience enjoyable and meaningful. Specifically, noting that this experience supported their understanding of the Air Force mission and what it might be like to be in a deployed environment, they shared,

It helped me understand the mission of the military a little bit more than just the Air Force. It did help with the people getting to interact with all of these different flights and trying to problem-solve with a guy that you have seen once in passing maybe in the chow hall and never talked to.—Trainee, Special Warfare

I think it was a good simulation of what deployed life could be like. And it did prep us. I think it did what it was intended to.—Trainee, Materiel Management

It was long and stressful and hot, but it did teach us how to work together under stress. We are all irritated, we are all hot, frustrated, but we still got to work together as a team to get through it. And it definitely helped us as a flight to work together to finish the training. It was pretty fun, but it was just so hot outside. Oh my God. But you got to deal with it.—Trainee, Security Forces

I think PACER FORGE is awesome. Just to give people real-time experience of how to effectively communicate, coordinate, and execute a mission, being ready for a mission. I had a long conversation with several of my fellow trainees at the time, and they're like, “Man, they should do several,” because not only is it super fun, but you realize what your strengths and your weaknesses are. There's one guy on our flight who was pretty quiet, but man, he could run an ECP [entry control point]. Nobody would have expected that from him in a trainee environment because he was never given the opportunity to showcase his talents . . . I think PACER FORGE gives people the chance to shine.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

PACER FORGE Provisional Does Not Provide Sufficient Responsibility to Every Recruit and Clear Ties to the Air Force Mission

Although trainees said that they appreciated the concept of PACER FORGE Provisional, there were several components they believed could be improved. Specifically, most said that there simply was not enough to do, and some mentioned that there was insufficient direction:

Most of it was hurry up and wait. Just sitting out there in the heat waiting for something to happen. Hoping something's going to happen because you're so bored.—Trainee, Materiel Management

I think it's valuable, but the way that they're doing it and the way that they're advertising it . . . didn't make me feel like more or less anything. Just seemed like there was like a filler.—Trainee, Security Forces

They just handed us a book, and they're like, "Read this. This is what you're supposed to do." And so, we didn't really get any instruction other than that until we completely mess[ed] something up . . . They could've used it as more of a teaching situation.—Trainee, Special Warfare

It was stupid because they didn't really brief us at all. They just gave us too many things all at once and expected us to roll with it.—Trainee, Special Warfare

We highlight that trainees who performed leadership roles—and were therefore more active throughout the program—were most likely to report a positive experience:

I enjoyed PACER FORGE because I was a TDL, which means I get to point people to where they're supposed to be . . . I got to see a lot of—I don't want to say accomplishments—but I did a lot. I set up tents. I made sure people were filling up the water. I set up DFPs [defensive fighting positions]. I made sure tents were organized, getting done, made sure people were getting relieved. I just did a lot. So I constantly felt a sense of accomplishment instead of just walking in circles. Because [if] I did have to walk in circles a few times, I could not have done that for two and a half days.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Of the 33 TTIs and MTLs we interviewed who reported interacting with trainees who had completed PACER FORGE Provisional, only two reported noticing any changes in these trainees (i.e., most instructors noted that they had seen no impact of PACER FORGE Provisional on their trainees). This observation raises several potential explanations that warrant further exploration.

Two additional concerns emerged from our observations of PACER FORGE Provisional. First, the associated missions were largely service- and context-agnostic, and the cadre did not provide a cohesive understanding of how these scenarios relate to the strategic challenges currently faced by the Air Force.¹⁰⁸ Second, although measures were implemented during team activities to minimize trainees' risk of injury, these precautions inadvertently compromised the realism of the training experience.¹⁰⁹ This tension between ensuring safety and adequately preparing Airmen for authentic warfighting scenarios is crucial to acknowledge because it could affect the development of the Air Force identity that PACER FORGE Provisional is intended to cultivate.

¹⁰⁸ The Air Force is aware of this issue and is already striving to address this challenge in its preparations for PACER FORGE Next, the successor to PACER FORGE Provisional.

¹⁰⁹ For example, we observed that, when crossing a rope bridge, trainees stacked their rifles together rather than each trainee keeping theirs on their person in order to limit the possibility of an injury caused by landing on the weapon after a fall. In another scenario, we observed that, rather than requiring "wounded" teammates in need of assistance to be carried back to a hardened shelter, those teammates could walk back, again reducing the possibility of injury if a teammate were to be dropped.

Recognize Achievements and Milestones

Though easy to overlook, meaningful celebrations emerged as valuable moments to reflect on achievements, honor heritage, and strengthen pride in the sister services.¹¹⁰ Some are planned, such as graduations, while others are spontaneous, such as a unit celebrating the end of an unexpectedly difficult exercise. Members of the sister services shared the following:

The Marine Corps really values the birthday ball. I know it sounds silly, but every unit has one. Every November, you're going to put on your blues, and you're going to celebrate the Marine Corps birthday and being a Marine, and you listen to the same words. It's a chance for the unit to celebrate together. Most people like them; some people hate them. It celebrates our heritage; it celebrates who we are. And everybody does it. It's not optional.—Marine Corps Veteran

Having all the units maintain certain events that are common. We all do an Army birthday thing. We all do the hail and farewell. It doesn't matter what unit you go to. It's going to be there. They may do it a little differently, but it's there. So you have these common ways of doing business that, when I show up somewhere, it's not that I showed up in a different Army in a different place.—Army Veteran¹¹¹

Air Force—Specific Observations

Trainees Noted That Meaningful Moments of Recognition in Basic Military Training Enhanced Their Sense of Belonging

In our interviews with Airmen, the extent to which they said that milestones were celebrated varied by context—whether in BMT, technical training, or operational settings. Trainees described a few symbolic acts of inclusion during BMT, such as receiving their name tapes, which fostered a sense of belonging and connection to something greater than themselves. Both trainees and instructors also highlighted BMT graduation as a significant milestone, marking an important transition in their Air Force journey:

It was a small thing because we all get issued this in BMT, but when we got our name tapes on our OCP uniforms, and then when I was able to put it on and actually wear it, seeing the US Air Force and my family's name—it was right on the same level. It felt great. And yes, it definitely did make me feel like I was a part of the Air Force.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

It was during the coin ceremony where everybody's outside. You see people you don't know from different squadrons, different flights. At least in my head, it started to make sense. I don't know these people, but they're graduating with me. They're with me in this.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

¹¹⁰ *Collective effervescence* argues that performing rituals, such as celebrations, has considerable influence on those involved and strengthens group cohesion. Through these rituals, the group affirms and maintains how significant it is to each individual involved. In an organization, celebratory rituals can develop members' organizational identity by encouraging people to see their significance within the organization and, in turn, the organization's significance to their own lives. See Durkheim, 1995.

¹¹¹ Hails and farewells are unit gatherings to introduce new members and bid farewell to leaving members. See, for example, Mission: Milspouse, "Hail and Farewells—It's a Unit Thing!" blog post, August 23, 2022.

I think it's graduation day. That might sound cliché, but I think when students actually have gone through that struggle and gotten to the end and they're walking across the stage, they finally feel like, okay, I'm part of this. I'm in it. I am here to do this job, to be part of this Force.—TTI

Few mentioned this topic during discussions of technical training, which suggests that these celebratory experiences are limited at that stage or have not felt as meaningful:

We've been implementing Airman awards. Now it gives them a little motivation. Whoever is standing out in their dress and appearance would get it noticed and get an award. And then the other one, we have an aircrew and a nonaircrew Airman of the month. Their instructors or we [MTLs] can nominate them. To get that award, they go to a board panel interview, and they have to recite the Airman's Creed and answer Air Force questions. So I think that reemphasizes the Airman concept.—MTL

One instructor provided a unique perspective, noting that group events might be more commonly paired with punishment than with celebration:

There is a view that only punishment is collective. Normally, when they hear "Airman" . . . , what I perceive the Airmen think about is punishment [rather than a point of pride]. When one person messes up, everybody has to get punished.—TTI

Some Expressed a Desire for More-Relevant Celebrations to Enhance Morale and Identity

Although our current effort focuses on initial training, our interviews suggest that some milestones in an operational context might not be celebrated. For some, these milestones might be perceived as unimportant or unnecessary, even though sentiments about their significance can shift in the moment. Several trainees and instructors expressed a desire for more opportunities to celebrate achievements and the Air Force:

The annuals, the celebrations, stuff like that—it absolutely matters. I've seen it many times, even when I was deployed: Nobody had any going-away gifts. I don't care if they tell you, "Oh, I don't want it. It means nothing to me." I'm still going to make it or get it for them. And every person looked at it and had a smile on their face. They love the little corny things that are individually personalized to them because it does matter. I think some people say they don't care because they're scared to not get it.—TTI

I get the goosebumps, the chill running down my spine, especially when it is a promotion ceremony—even retirement ceremony—when it's a very official ceremony.—TTI

Does the Air Force have a ball? Like, the Marines have a ball. . . . I think if they don't, they should probably try something like that. I know there's a lot of officers that will get together and have their own little ball event and stuff. . . . I think that would really help people in the Air Force feel more together, especially the Air Force.—Trainee, Security Forces

Observations and Insights About PACER FORGE Provisional

This appendix provides additional details and observational analysis of PACER FORGE Provisional, the Air Force’s BMT culminating event. The material in this appendix supports the findings described in Chapters 3 and 4 with additional programmatic detail, observations, and illustrative context.

Approach

As part of our analysis of how the Air Force develops a sense of service identity in its members, we observed one full cycle of the PACER FORGE Provisional event at Lackland Air Base from June 23 to 25, 2025. Our observations focused on how the event was facilitated, its alignment with stated DAF priorities, and key strengths and areas for improvement. Observations were supplemented with document review and discussions with leadership and cadre from the 319th TRS, which oversees PACER FORGE Provisional. We also conducted semistructured interviews and focus groups with TTIs, MTLs, and technical trainees (see Appendix A for methodological details and Appendix C for additional discussion of related findings).

History of PACER FORGE

For decades, the Air Force has used a culminating event at the close of BMT to instill service values and provide trainees with an immersive experience that integrates foundational attributes. Previous iterations have included

- field training exercises (1996–1999)
- Warrior Week (1999–2006)
- Basic Expeditionary Airman Skills Training (BEAST) (2006–2022)
- PACER FORGE (2022–2024)
- PACER FORGE Provisional and PACER FORGE Next (2024–present).

Each iteration has been developed with an eye toward current U.S. operational and strategic priorities. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the culminating event focused on preparing trainees for a unipolar moment.¹¹² From the early 2000s to the late 2010s, the event was geared toward countering

¹¹² DAF, “319 TRS PF Mission Brief,” slide deck, June 17, 2025, slide 7.

violent extremism.¹¹³ Now, the Air Force is using the BMT culminating event to prepare trainees for a strategic environment of peer competition.¹¹⁴

In August 2024, the 2AF commander issued a decision memorandum extending PACER FORGE from two days to three days and two nights. PACER FORGE Provisional, first implemented in March 2025, serves as a transitional version informing the development of PACER FORGE Next. Changes to PACER FORGE were issued to increase exposure to great-power competition scenarios that more closely connect to current operational needs; they were also designed to provide trainees with opportunities for exposure to a mission-oriented, trainee-led environment.¹¹⁵

PACER FORGE Provisional represents more than an extension of training time. The Air Force is striving to create an event that is more experiential, with opportunities for trainees to exercise decisionmaking agency, work in teams, and operate with limited specific task guidance.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the newest version of PACER FORGE is intended to complement updates being made to training curriculum throughout BMT, including greater focus on key skills and briefs on strategic considerations.

Program Description and Priorities

PACER FORGE Provisional is executed across three days and two nights (approximately 54 hours). During this time, trainees rotate through four primary roles intended to simulate responsibilities associated with DOGS. These roles are as follows:

- D: defending the air base and its systems
- O: operating on missions or mission systems and equipment
- G: generating air and space assets or forces
- S: sustaining the base, assets, or forces.

PACER FORGE Provisional guidance identifies a variety of activities aligned with these roles,¹¹⁷ including securing an air base, collecting supply drops, recovering high-value assets, responding to simulated attacks, building cargo pallets, and executing tactical combat casualty care support.¹¹⁸ Following two days of missions conducted both on base (e.g., manning defensive fighting positions, repelling attacks from opposing forces, accomplishing accountability) and “outside the wire” (e.g., retrieving assets, collecting supplies), trainees completed the final obstacle course; Creating Leaders, Airmen, and Warriors (CLAW); and a multimile movement to recover an asset, marking the conclusion of the exercise.

¹¹³ DAF, 2025, slide 7.

¹¹⁴ DAF, 2025, slide 7.

¹¹⁵ DAF, 2025, slide 9.

¹¹⁶ 319 TRS leadership, unstructured conversation with the authors, June 23, 2025.

¹¹⁷ DAF, 2025, slide 19.

¹¹⁸ We observed trainees engaging in the majority of these activities, except for pallet building, which the 319 TRS cadre noted is difficult to run given limited instructor availability and material resources.

Insights from On-Site Observations

Execution Is Trainee-Led with Structured Feedback

Trainees were grouped into small teams and were provided significant autonomy in completing assigned missions. After providing an overview of a given mission—such as recovering a high-value asset—cadre and MTIs would allow teams to determine how to execute their tasks. We observed frequent and immediate feedback, with cadre and MTIs reviewing team decisions and performance after each mission. This feedback often focused on identifying what did not go as planned and prompting trainees to reflect on how they could improve, reinforcing development of critical thinking skills and comfort with decisionmaking authority. This is in line with how squadron leadership described this program: as cadre- and MTI-facilitated, but trainee-led, with a focus on small-team execution, teamwork, and airmanship.¹¹⁹

PACER FORGE Missions Were Largely Service- and Context-Agnostic

Many observed missions required teamwork and coordination but did not entail activities or tasks clearly connected to Air Force–specific mission demands (i.e., DOGS). For example, in a Raging River exercise, trainees navigated an obstacle scenario using limited plans to cross an imagined body of water. Although the activity required communication and problem-solving, it was not clearly connected to Air Force operational roles or responsibilities associated with DOGS.

These observations aligned with constraints described by 319th TRS leadership, including limitation of the current physical environment at Lackland and the compressed timeline for implementing PACER FORGE Provisional. Leadership noted that these factors constrained the ability to link all missions directly to airpower-specific tasks. However, the Air Force is planning improvements through facility modifications and a curriculum update that includes substantial new material aimed at strengthening trainee understanding of DOGS.¹²⁰

Safety Requirements Can Limit Perceived Training Realism

Although measures were implemented during team activities to minimize trainees' risk of injury, these precautions inadvertently compromised the realism of the training experience.¹²¹ This highlights an inherent tension between ensuring safety and providing experiences that feel operationally authentic. How this balance is managed could influence the extent to which PACER FORGE Provisional supports the development of a credible Air Force service identity.

¹¹⁹ DAF, 2025, slide 9.

¹²⁰ BMT curriculum planner, unstructured conversation with the authors, July 7, 2025.

¹²¹ For example, we observed that, when crossing a rope bridge, trainees stacked their rifles together rather than each trainee keeping theirs on their person in order the possibility of an injury caused by landing on the weapon after a fall. In another scenario, we observed that, rather than requiring “wounded” teammates in need of assistance to be carried back to a hardened shelter, those teammates could walk back, again reducing the possibility of injury if a teammate were to be dropped.

Insights from Semistructured Interviews and Focus Groups

This section summarizes findings drawn from semistructured interviews and focus groups with instructors, leaders, and trainees. Detailed methodological information is provided in Appendix A. Although much of the PACER FORGE–related material discussed here also appears in Appendix C, it is included in this section to improve accessibility for readers primarily interested in PACER FORGE–specific findings.

The PACER FORGE Concept Is Viewed as Promising

Air Force trainees described the pride they felt after challenging moments or events. Overcoming difficult tasks helped them feel that they had “earned” their position as Airmen:

When we accomplish those rucks or as we graduate tech school and as we graduate BMT, I think that’s when we feel it the most. We actually are accomplishing [something], and we proved ourself to be worthy.—Trainee, Security Forces

It’s one of the last events that you do at PACER FORGE, and you’re carrying this briefcase. At the time, we didn’t know what was in it, but it weighed . . . maybe 70 pounds, and it has these weird handles, . . . so you have to pick it up in a weird way . . . We carried it all the way around PACER FORGE, which must have been three, three-and-a-half miles, four miles . . . We opened it up, and at the bottom, it was sandbags . . . But on top of those sandbags, it was the Air Force patch, which signifies the heavy burden of the Air Force that [is being bestowed on us]. And ever since we got that, I felt like we were actual Airmen. We passed the test. Carrying the heavy burdens around the whole PACER FORGE, and that was a reward, saying that we can do it, and we’re ready to take on the challenge.—Trainee, Materiel Management

Generally, instructors indicated broad approval of the concept (describing it as a “big step”), and trainees said that they found the experience enjoyable and meaningful. Specifically, noting that this experience supported their understanding of the Air Force mission and what it might be like to be in a deployed environment, trainees said,

It helped me understand the mission of the military a little bit more than just the Air Force. It did help with the people getting to interact with all of these different flights and trying to problem-solve with a guy that you have seen once in passing maybe in the chow hall and never talked to.—Trainee, Special Warfare

I think it was a good simulation of what deployed life could be like. And it did prep us. I think it did what it was intended to.—Trainee, Materiel Management

It was long and stressful and hot, but it did teach us how to work together under stress. We are all irritated, we are all hot, frustrated, but we still got to work together as a team to get through it. And it definitely helped us as a flight to work together to finish the training. It was pretty fun, but it was just so hot outside. Oh my God. But you got to deal with it.—Trainee, Security Forces

I think PACER FORGE is awesome. Just to give people real-time experience of how to effectively communicate, coordinate, and execute a mission, being ready for a mission. I had a long conversation with several of my fellow trainees at the time, and they're like, "Man, they should do several," because not only is it super fun, but you realize what your strengths and your weaknesses are. There's one guy on our flight who was pretty quiet, but man, he could run an ECP [entry control point]. Nobody would have expected that from him in a trainee environment because he was never given the opportunity to showcase his talents . . . I think PACER FORGE gives people the chance to shine.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

PACER FORGE Currently Does Not Provide Sufficient Responsibility to Every Recruit

Although trainees appreciated the concept of PACER FORGE, they noted several components that they believed could be improved. Specifically, most said there simply was not enough to do, and some mentioned that there was insufficient direction:

Most of it was hurry up and wait. Just sitting out there in the heat waiting for something to happen. Hoping something's going to happen because you're so bored.—Trainee, Materiel Management

I think it's valuable, but the way that they're doing it and the way that they're advertising it . . . didn't make me feel like more or less anything. Just seemed like there was like a filler.—Trainee, Security Forces

They just handed us a book, and they're like, "Read this. This is what you're supposed to do." And so we didn't really get any instruction other than that until we completely mess[ed] something up . . . They could've used it as more of a teaching situation.—Trainee, Special Warfare

It was stupid because they didn't really brief us at all. They just gave us too many things all at once and expected us to roll with it.—Trainee, Special Warfare

We highlight that trainees who performed leadership roles—and were therefore more active throughout the program—tended to report a positive experience:

I enjoyed PACER FORGE because I was a TDL, which means I get to point people to where they're supposed to be . . . I got to see a lot of—I don't want to say accomplishments—but I did a lot. I set up tents. I made sure people were filling up the water. I set up DFPs [defensive fighting positions]. I made sure tents were organized, getting done, made sure people were getting relieved. I just did a lot. So, I constantly felt a sense of accomplishment instead of just walking in circles. Because [if] I did have to walk in circles a few times, I could not have done that for two and a half days.—Trainee, Aircrew Operations

Of the 33 TTIs and MTLs we interviewed who reported interacting with trainees who had completed PACER FORGE, only two reported noticing any changes among these trainees (i.e., most instructors noted that they had seen no impact of PACER FORGE on their trainees). This observation raises several potential explanations that warrant further exploration.

Conclusion

Overall, observations and interviews indicate that PACER FORGE Provisional represents a meaningful evolution in the Air Force's approach to BMT culminating events, with clear strengths in fostering shared challenge, teamwork, and trainee agency. Trainees and instructors generally indicated that the concept was valuable and aligned with identity-building goals. At the same time, variation in mission specificity, distribution of meaningful responsibilities, and perceived realism—along with limited observable downstream effects during technical training—suggest that the identity-related impacts of PACER FORGE are not yet consistently experienced by all trainees. These findings provide important context for the analyses in Chapter 3 and inform the recommendations in Chapter 4 for continued refinement and evaluation of the PACER FORGE construct.

Abbreviations

2AF	Second Air Force
AFSC	Air Force specialty code
AI	artificial intelligence
BMT	Basic Military Training
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DOGS	defending the airbase and its systems; operating on missions or mission systems and equipment; generating air and space assets or forces; and sustaining the base, assets, or forces
LLM	large language model
MTI	military training instructor
MTL	military training leader
NCO	noncommissioned officer
OCP	operational camouflage pattern
PACER FORGE	Primary Agile Combat Employment Range, Forward Operational Readiness Generation Exercise
PAF	RAND Project AIR FORCE
PT	physical training
TDL	tactical deployment leader
TRS	training squadron
TTI	technical training instructor
USAAF	U.S. Army Air Forces

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2AF—See Second Air Force.

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