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USAF Moving Ahead with Biggest Change to Promotion System in Decades

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The children of Col. Jason Klumb, the staff judge advocate for the Missouri Air National Guard, pin his new rank on during a promotion ceremony in Kansas City, Mo., Oct. 6, 2019. *Air National Guard photo by TSgt. Patrick Evenson.*

The Air Force is moving forward with changes to the way officers compete for promotions, beginning with the next lieutenant colonels board in Mar

2020. That board will see eligible majors compete not against the vast pool of officers who could be promoted, but instead within six new categories.

The change means officers in smaller, specialized communities, such as cyber, space, or intelligence, will no longer compete against combat-experienced pilots and other airmen in the Line of the Air Force category, but instead compete against peers whose skills, career progression, and experience more closely align with their own.

More, smaller categories means promotion opportunities for each can be tied to the number of openings in that category, minimizing the potential for officers to be placed in positions where they must oversee work they haven't ever done themselves.

The service [first floated](#) the idea of a [new promotion system](#) in May, then put it on hold in order to gather feedback from the field over the summer. Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein endorsed the plan in September and Under Secretary Matt Donovan, who was acting secretary at the time, approved the plan Oct. 7.

[Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly](#), the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel, and services, spent the summer briefing officers around the globe and [seeking feedback](#) on the planned changes.

After nearly 100 briefings, however, the categories and the Air Force specialties they encompass remain as initially proposed:

- Air operations and special warfare: Includes all conventional (11X) and remotely piloted aircraft pilots (18X), along with combat systems (12X), air battle manager (13B), special tactics (13C), combat rescue (13D), and tactical air control party (13L) officers
- Nuclear and missile operations: Includes only nuclear and missile operations (13N) officers
- Space: Includes both space operations (13S) and astronaut (13A) officers

- Information warfare: Includes cyber operations (17X), intelligence (14N), operations research analyst (61A), weather (15W), special investigations (71S), information operations (14F), and public affairs (35X) officers
- Combat support: Includes airfield operations (13M), aircraft maintenance (21A), munitions and missile maintenance (21M), logistics readiness (21R), security forces (31P), civil engineering (32E), force support (38F), contracting (64P), and financial management (65X)
- Force modernization: Includes chemists (61C), physicist/nuclear engineers (61D), developmental engineers (62E), and acquisition management (63A) officers

“This will be the largest change in the way officer personnel management is working in our history,” said Shon Manasco, assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs. “There have been a number of people looking at this for quite some time.”

Kelly said the makeup of the categories could still change over time.

“The only thing I’m 100 percent sure of is we didn’t get it 100 percent right,” he said. “There were obviously some people who thought we should make some adjustments to how those categories look. But for every voice we heard on one side, there was an equal but opposite voice on the other. So we think we’ve got it about right. But until we flush this out and actually go through it a couple of times, we won’t know exactly.”

Manasco said there will be little apparent impact for the majors reviewed by the next lieutenant colonel promotion board. For future majors, though, “they will have benefited from more tailored developmental experiences, such that it actually should make them more competitive,” he said.

This, he and Kelly argue, is the key: Under the old system, every officer specialty had to adapt its career path to look like the others, so that officers would portray the right kind of leadership development to get promoted. But engineers and logisticians require different experiences in their career paths than do pilots and air battle managers.

Officials argue that officers should instead follow developmental paths that provide unique skills and experiences needed for a particular career field.

“Changing the promotion system was the key to unlock our ability to create these unique development paths,” Manasco said. “We are convinced that, with this, over time, an even more talented group of officers will populate our ranks.”

Officers in each category will compete with all other officers in that group, even when there may be significant differences between their development paths.

That means public affairs officers will have to compete against cyber warriors and intelligence officers in the information warfare category. That won't be easy, acknowledged one career public affairs officer: “But it's still better than having to compete against everybody, including pilots.”

Each competitive category will effectively need a separate board, as is the case with medical specialties, lawyers, and a few others today. Boards will include specialists from that field and others who represent the broader interests of the Air Force. All of the checks and balances designed to guard against individual biases or other challenges to the board's fairness will remain in place.

To help make the process more transparent for all airmen, the Air Force will publish the secretary's annual guidance to promotion boards, called the Memorandum of Instruction. That document defines “what we expect of an officer in terms of competence and character, regardless of AFSC,” Kelly said.

The secretary will also approve and publish “Career Field Briefs,” which will be briefed at the promotion boards. For the first time, those will provide specifics for “the education, training and experiences that we value and need to look for,” Kelly said.

Both types of guidance will be published in December or January and will remain in effect throughout the year for all promotion boards meeting in

2020.

Sharing that information is one shift that grew out of the summer briefings, Kelly said.

“We’re still a military hierarchical organization, but this idea of being more collaborative and having the field involved is really powerful and I think it’s served us well,” he said. “We changed some processes to make sure we could meet those expectations of transparency.”

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