



Highlights of GAO-07-224, a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Accessing and retaining high-quality officers in the current environment of increasing deployments and armed conflict may be two of the all volunteer force's greatest challenges. The military services use three programs to access officer candidates: (1) military academies, (2) the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and (3) Officer Candidate Schools (OCS). In addition to accessing new officers, the services must retain enough experienced officers to meet current operational needs and the services' transformation initiatives.

GAO was asked to assess the extent to which the services are accessing and retaining the officers required to meet their needs. GAO also identified steps that the Department of Defense (DOD) and the services have taken and the impediments they face in increasing officers' foreign language proficiency. For this report, GAO examined actual accession and retention rates for officers in fiscal years (FYs) 2001, 2003, and 2005 as well as projections for later years. Also, GAO reviewed documents on foreign language training and plans.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Army develop and implement a strategic plan to address its emerging officer accession and retention problems. DOD partially concurred with GAO's recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-224.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek Stewart at (202) 512-5559 or stewartd@gao.gov.

MILITARY PERSONNEL

Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges

What GAO Found

The services generally met most of their overall accession needs for newly commissioned officers, but the Army faces challenges accessing enough officers to meet its needs. The Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force met their overall FYs 2001, 2003, and 2005 officer accession needs, but are experiencing challenges accessing specific groups, like flight officers and medical professionals. Moreover, the Army did not meet its needs for officers in FY 2001 and FY 2003 and expects to struggle with future accessions. To meet its officer accession needs, the Army's traditional approach has been to rely first on its ROTC and academy programs and then compensate for shortfalls in these programs by increasing its OCS accessions. Between FYs 2001 and 2005, the Army nearly doubled the number of OCS commissioned officers due to (1) academy and ROTC shortfalls, (2) decreased ROTC scholarships, and (3) a need to expand its officer corps. But OCS is expected to reach its capacity in FY 2007, and resource limitations such as housing and classroom space may prevent further expansion. In addition, the Army's three accession programs are decentralized and do not formally coordinate with one another, making it difficult for the Army, using its traditional approach, to effectively manage risks and allocate resources across programs in an integrated, strategic fashion. Without a strategic, integrated plan for determining overall annual accession goals, managing risks, and allocating resources, the Army's ability to meet its future mission requirements and to transform to more deployable, modular units is uncertain.

All of the services except the Army generally met their past overall officer retention needs. The Army, which continues to be heavily involved in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, faces many retention challenges. For example, the Army is experiencing a shortfall of mid-level officers, such as majors, because it commissioned fewer officers 10 years ago due to a post-Cold War force reduction. It projects a shortage of 3,000 or more officers annually through FY 2013. While the Army is implementing and considering initiatives to improve officer retention, the initiatives are not integrated and will not affect officer retention until at least 2009 or are unfunded. As with its accession shortfalls, the Army does not have an integrated strategic plan to address its retention shortfalls. While the Army is most challenged in retaining officers, the Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force generally met their retention needs in FYs 2001, 2003, and 2005; but each experienced challenges in occupational specialties such as medical officers.

DOD and the services are taking steps to enhance the foreign language proficiency of junior officers, but many impediments must be overcome to achieve the language objectives that DOD has laid out for junior officers. For example, academy and ROTC officer candidates already have demanding workloads and ROTC does not control curricula at host institutions. The services recognize these impediments and are drafting plans to implement DOD's foreign language objectives.