

**MLDC Research Areas**

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

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Knowledge and Perceptions of Promotion Within the Services

Abstract

Underlying some of the MLDC charter tasks is concern about the fairness of the Services' promotion systems in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. Fairness of promotion systems can relate to a host of factors, including a lack of bias in performance reviews and the provision of adequate information about how the promotion system works. After presenting information on some of the common ways in which the Services try to educate servicemembers about promotion, this issue paper presents findings on servicemembers' knowledge about and perceptions of promotion within their Service. Survey results indicate that there are no large or important racial/ethnic or gender differences in servicemembers' self-reported knowledge about how their Service's promotion system works, perceptions regarding the fairness of their performance evaluations, or their satisfaction with opportunities for advancement in their Service.

Underlying several of the charter tasks of the MLDC is concern about the existence and maintenance of fair promotion opportunities for all military members. Fairness of promotion opportunities can relate to a host of factors, and this issue paper (IP) focuses on two: objectivity in performance reviews and provision of adequate information about how the promotion system works. In particular, the commissioners requested information regarding the extent to which the information the Services provide to their members regarding the promotion system and career options is equally accessible to and effective for men and women and members of all race/ethnicity groups.

After presenting information on some of the common ways in which the five

Services try to educate servicemembers about promotion, this IP presents findings on servicemembers' knowledge about and perceptions of promotion within their Service. Specifically, using results from a small survey sample, the IP explores whether there are racial/ethnic or gender differences in responses to questions about the following aspects of the promotion system:

- Knowledge of the Promotion System
- Fairness of Performance Evaluations
- Opportunities for Advancement.

Data Collection

During the MLDC meetings in November and December 2009 and January 2010, the military Services presented information about the different methods used to educate servicemembers about the promotion system. The first section of the IP provides a summary of what the Services do to educate their members about the promotion system. Note that this information may not include all promotion education programs and tools because it is likely that not all programs were described during these presentations.

The remaining sections of the IP present survey results regarding servicemembers' knowledge about and perceptions of the promotion system. The survey data were collected in March 2010 via the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute's online Defense Equal Opportunity Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS).¹ A total of 2,196 servicemembers completed the survey, with 2,004 of the servicemembers providing usable information.² Because no effort was made to ensure that the sample of respondents would be representative across Services or demographic groups, the sample is effectively a "convenience" sample based on those who happened to be completing the DEOCS in

March. The gender breakdown of the final sample of 2,004 participants was 85 percent male and 15 percent female. The racial/ethnic breakdown was

- 60 percent white non-Hispanic
- 13 percent black non-Hispanic
- 15 percent Hispanic
- 4 percent Asian non-Hispanic
- 7 percent other non-Hispanic (American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, or multiple races).

Each Service was represented in the survey sample, with 5 percent (110 respondents) from the Air Force, 38 percent (765 respondents) from the Army, 6 percent (121 respondents) from the Coast Guard, 17 percent (334 respondents) from the Marine Corps, and 33 percent (664 respondents) from the Navy.³ In terms of corps, 87 percent of participants were enlisted, 12 percent were military officers, and 1 percent were warrant officers.

To supplement findings from the survey data, this IP also examines qualitative information obtained from informational meetings conducted by a subset of MLDC commissioners in February 2010. These commissioners met with three different groups each from the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Army, and the Air Force: enlisted members, junior noncommissioned and commissioned officers, and senior noncommissioned and commissioned officers. Each enlisted group consisted of a dozen or more personnel, although the groups from higher in the chain of command were smaller. These informational meetings were designed around the topic of diversity within the military, but the topic of promotion did arise, and we include the relevant information in this paper. However, note that the sample sizes of the groups were very small. Therefore, the information obtained through these meetings, although helpful in providing some context to some of the survey results, may not reflect widespread trends in promotion knowledge across the military.

How the Services Educate Their Members About the Promotion System

According to their briefings to the MLDC, the Services use a variety of methods for educating servicemembers about the promotion system. Some of these methods are fairly informal and do not involve any systematic implementation or tracking. For example, the Services rely on mentors, career counselors, or affinity groups to teach junior members about the promotion system. The Services also direct members to search for information on their personnel-management websites. For example, the Air Force maintains information about promotion on the Air Force Personnel Center website. Promotion-related information on such websites can include videos about promotion, PowerPoint slides on force development, and information on previous promotion board members and board results.

The Services also use more-formal methods for educating servicemembers about promotion. Many of the Services conduct “road shows” or “spread-the-word” trips, in which a small set of trainers (e.g., Coast Guard Career Management Branch staff officers) travel to installations to present information on promotion and career development. For example, the Army sends a group of officers from its Human Resources Command to visit officers in the Intermediate Level Education program at Fort Leavenworth. Some Services also assign dedicated career counselors (e.g., Air Force career assistance advisors) to different locations throughout the force. Some Services also reported that they imbed information about promotion into educational courses (e.g., the Air Force’s squadron commanders courses).

More-detailed information on the Services’ mentoring programs and the career-development resources they provide can be found in two other issue papers (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010b, 2010c, respectively). Combined, these IPs show that the Services are making extensive efforts to assist their members in career development, including teaching them about the promotion process. They also show, however, that there is very little information about the overall effectiveness of these efforts and their effectiveness for members of different demographic groups.⁴ In particular, it is not clear how the effectiveness of more-informal methods of providing information about the promotion system may differ across gender and race/ethnicity groups. For example, we do not know whether, compared with men and whites, women and minorities receive less-detailed information about the promotion system in their informal mentoring relationships and social networks (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010b).

To fill this gap, the IP on career-development resources (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010c) presents survey results on servicemembers’ satisfaction with the career-development resources they have received, and this IP presents results on servicemembers’ knowledge about and perceptions of the promotion system.

Servicemembers’ Perceptions About Their Knowledge of the Promotion System

The first set of survey items addressed whether servicemembers believe that they understand the promotion system in their Service. We included the following three survey items (each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “totally disagree” to 5 = “totally agree”):

- 1) I know how my Service’s promotion system works.
- 2) I am provided with adequate information about how the promotion process works.
- 3) I know what I need to do to get promoted in my field.

Because we were interested in examining overall knowledge about the promotion system, we averaged responses across the items to create a single representative score.⁵ Using a composite score affords a more reliable assessment of a group's opinion by minimizing the influence of any wording bias that may be contained in a single item. The overall average score across items and respondents was 4.16 (*SD* = 0.91),⁶ indicating that servicemembers "moderately agree" with statements that indicate that they believe they have enough knowledge of the promotion system. Table 1 shows average ratings for each scale and individual item, broken out by gender and race/ethnicity.⁷ There were no statistically significant differences based on either gender or race/ethnicity.

Although servicemembers generally reported that they know how the promotion system works, qualitative data from the informational meetings suggests that this reported knowledge may not be complete. That is, many of the participants in the informational meetings stated that they know how the promotion system works but, when asked to explain the promotion system, had some difficulty doing so. Furthermore, participants in the informational meetings stated that they did not start to learn about the promotion system until they were eligible to go before a promotion board. Also, only a few of these participants stated that they had received any formal education on the promotion system, and several said that they had only received information about the system from a superior once or twice in their entire careers. Although the informational meeting data are based on only a small set of responses (mainly from noncommissioned officers and officers), the results suggest that self-assessed confidence in knowledge about the promotion system may not translate into a full understanding of the promotion system: People may not know what they do not know.

Servicemembers' Perceptions of the Fairness of Performance Evaluations

The second set of survey items focused on perceptions of the fairness of the servicemembers' own performance evaluations. We included the following two survey items (each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "totally disagree" to 5 = "totally agree"):

- 1) My performance evaluation is a fair reflection of my performance.
- 2) On my last performance evaluation, I was rated lower than I deserved.

Because the second question was negatively worded, its scores were reversed. Therefore, higher scores reflect more-positive perceptions of one's performance evaluations.

As in the previous section, we averaged responses across the two items to create a single representative score for perceptions of the fairness of performance evaluations.⁸ The overall average score across items and respondents was 3.58 (*SD* = 1.07), indicating only somewhat-positive perceptions of the fairness of one's performance evaluations. Table 2 shows the average ratings for each scale and individual item, broken out by gender and race/ethnicity. Again, there were no statistically significant differences based on either gender or race/ethnicity.

Servicemembers' Perceptions About Their Opportunities for Advancement

Our final set of survey items focused on perceptions about opportunities for advancement. Specifically, these survey items focused on servicemembers' beliefs that they had received adequate assignments and training to be promoted

Table 1. Average Level of Knowledge About the Promotion System, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

	Average Rating Across All Items	Survey Item		
		1	2	3
Gender				
Overall average (N = 2,004)	4.16	4.17	4.09	4.22
Female (N = 294)	4.12	4.11	4.04	4.24
Male (N = 1,710)	4.17	4.18	4.11	4.22
Race/ethnicity				
Overall average (N = 2,004)	4.16	4.17	4.09	4.22
White non-Hispanic (N = 1,208)	4.18	4.19	4.12	4.23
Black non-Hispanic (N = 269)	4.09	4.08	4.03	4.16
Hispanic (N = 307)	4.16	4.17	4.05	4.26
Asian non-Hispanic (N = 75)	4.24	4.24	4.12	4.37
Other non-Hispanic (N = 145)	4.08	4.08	4.06	4.10

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = moderately agree, 5 = totally agree. N = group sample size.

Survey Item 1: I know how my Service's promotion system works.

Survey Item 2: I am provided with adequate information about how the promotion process works.

Survey Item 3: I know what I need to do to get promoted in my field.

and that they were likely to receive promotions in the future. We included the following six survey items (each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “totally disagree” to 5 = “totally agree”):

- 1) I can expect to get the assignments needed to be competitive for promotion.
- 2) To date, I am satisfied with the pace of my promotions.
- 3) I am satisfied with my chances for future advancement.
- 4) I believe I have received adequate training to be competitive for promotions.
- 5) I believe I have received the necessary assignments to be competitive for promotions.
- 6) Completing all necessary professional development courses enhanced my chance of being promoted.

As in the previous sections, we averaged responses across the items to create a single representative score.⁹ The overall average score across items and respondents was 3.69 (*SD* = 0.95), indicating only somewhat-positive perceptions of opportunities for advancement. Table 3 shows the average ratings for each scale and individual item, broken out by gender and race/ethnicity. Unlike the previous sets of results, there was one statistically significant difference across demographic groups. Specifically, there were gender differences, such that women were less satisfied than men with their promotion opportunities. However, the size of the difference was very small, meaning that the difference cannot be interpreted as having practical significance.

Relationships Among Servicemembers’ Promotion-Related Knowledge and Perceptions

Using the survey data, we also examined the extent to which there were relationships (i.e., correlations)¹⁰ between the three sets of promotion-related perceptions (i.e., knowledge about the promotion system, perceptions of the fairness of

performance evaluations, and perceptions of opportunities for advancement). Overall, individuals who reported greater knowledge about the promotion system were significantly more likely to report perceptions of greater fairness of performance evaluations and more-positive beliefs about opportunities for advancement. Likewise, those who reported perceptions of greater fairness of performance evaluations were significantly more likely to report more-positive beliefs about opportunities for advancement. Although these results are based only on perceptions, they suggest that servicemembers who believe that they know the promotion system are more likely both to feel confident about their chances of being promoted in the future and to believe that their performance evaluations are fair than are servicemembers who are report less knowledge of the promotion system. Similarly, servicemembers who believe that their performance evaluations are fair are more likely to feel confident about their chances for advancement than are servicemembers who report less confidence in the fairness of their performance evaluations.

Conclusion

The Services educate their members about the promotion system using several different means, some formal and some informal. There is currently little information about the overall effectiveness of these efforts and their effectiveness for members of different demographic groups. However, survey results indicate that there are no gender or racial/ethnic differences in servicemembers’ perceptions of their knowledge about the promotion system, the fairness of the evaluation process, or their opportunities for advancement.¹¹ More specifically, survey results indicate that, regardless of gender and race/ethnicity, servicemembers generally believe that they

- know how the promotion system works
- receive fair performance evaluations
- have enough opportunities for career advancement.

Table 2. Average Perceptions of the Fairness of Performance Evaluations, by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Rank

	Average Rating Across All Items	Survey Item	
		1	2
Gender			
Overall average (N = 2,004)	3.58	3.82	3.34
Female (N = 294)	3.53	3.78	3.28
Male (N = 1,710)	3.59	3.83	3.35
Race/ethnicity			
Overall average (N = 2,004)	3.58	3.82	3.34
White non-Hispanic (N = 1,208)	3.59	3.82	3.37
Black non-Hispanic (N = 269)	3.59	3.86	3.33
Hispanic (N = 307)	3.54	3.85	3.22
Asian non-Hispanic (N = 75)	3.42	3.76	3.08
Other non-Hispanic (N = 145)	3.62	3.77	3.48

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = moderately agree, 5 = totally agree.

N = group sample size.

Survey Item 1: My performance evaluation is a fair reflection of my performance.

Survey Item 2: On my last performance evaluation, I was rated lower than I deserved.

Similarly, the survey results reported in the IP on career-development resources (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010c) showed that there were no demographic differences in servicemembers' satisfaction with the career-development resources they received.

However, two mitigating factors suggest that this issue deserves further investigation. First, if women and minorities have less access to mentors and social networks that provide detailed information about the promotion system, informal education about promotion may be less effective for women and minorities than for white men (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a). Second, the survey results presented in this IP are not conclusive because they are based on a small, unrepresentative sample and because they report servicemembers' *perceptions* of their knowledge about the promotion system, not their *actual* knowledge.

Notes

¹DEOCS assesses critical organizational-climate dimensions, such as military equal opportunity, civilian equal employment opportunity, and organizational effectiveness. DEOCS is administered by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute and is typically deployed at the request of a military unit commander. It is available 24 hours a day and is operated like an employee survey.

²By useable data, we mean that the respondent provided ethnicity information and did not appear to engage in random responding throughout the survey (e.g., put the same response for all questions). From the original 2,196 people who completed the survey, 108 were removed for having random response patterns and 84 were removed for not providing race or ethnicity information. This resulted in the final sample of 2,004 servicemembers.

³The percentages do not sum to 100 because of numerical rounding.

⁴If such information exists, it did not accompany the information describing the programs.

⁵To support averaging these items into a single unified scale, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (a statistical procedure designed to assess the extent to which the items are measuring a single theme). We also examined the extent to which the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability or internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Table 3. Average Perceptions About Opportunities for Advancement, by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Rank

	Average Rating Across All Items	Survey Item					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender							
Overall average (N = 2,004)	3.69	3.71	3.53	3.63	3.78	3.67	3.81
Female (N = 294)	3.58	3.63	3.57	3.66	3.47	3.45	3.72
Male (N = 1,710)	3.71	3.73	3.52	3.63	3.84	3.71	3.82
Race/ethnicity							
Overall average (N = 2,004)	3.69	3.71	3.53	3.63	3.78	3.67	3.81
White non-Hispanic (N = 1,208)	3.69	3.72	3.54	3.64	3.81	3.67	3.76
Black non-Hispanic (N = 269)	3.66	3.62	3.54	3.67	3.68	3.59	3.86
Hispanic (N = 307)	3.73	3.79	3.54	3.61	3.79	3.75	3.92
Asian non-Hispanic (N = 75)	3.78	3.80	3.61	3.68	3.93	3.77	3.89
Other non-Hispanic (N = 145)	3.58	3.64	3.31	3.49	3.68	3.54	3.79

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = moderately agree, 5 = totally agree.

N = Sample size for group.

Survey Item 1: I can expect to get the assignments needed to be competitive for promotion.

Survey Item 2: To date, I am satisfied with the pace of my promotions.

Survey Item 3: I am satisfied with my chances for future advancement.

Survey Item 4: I believe I have received adequate training to be competitive for promotions.

Survey Item 5: I believe I have received the necessary assignments to be competitive for promotions.

Survey Item 6: Completing all necessary professional development courses enhanced my chance of being promoted.

Table 4. Correlations Between Knowledge About the Promotion System, Perceptions of the Fairness of Performance Evaluations, and Perceptions About Opportunities for Advancement

	Knowledge about the Promotion System	Perceptions of the Fairness of Performance Evaluations	Perceptions about Opportunities for Advancement
Knowledge about the promotion system	--		
Perceptions of the fairness of performance evaluations	0.34**	--	
Perceptions about opportunities for advancement	0.60**	0.48**	--

NOTES: N = 2,196, where N = sample size; ** indicates a statistically significant correlation at $p < 0.01$.

⁶*SD* stands for *Standard Deviation*, which is a statistic used to describe the variation around the mean in a sample of data. The larger the standard deviation, the more “spread out” are the scores in the sample from the mean.

⁷To save space, survey results by corps (i.e., enlisted, warrant officer, and commissioned officer) and branch of Service are not provided in this IP. Interested readers can read survey results broken out by corps and branch of Service in the appendix at <http://mldc.whs.mil>.

⁸To support averaging these items into a single unified scale, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis, which is a statistical procedure designed to examine the extent to which the items are measuring a single theme. We also examined the extent to which the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability or internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.57$). This alpha level appears to be low, but, because alpha levels increase with the number of items in a scale, this alpha level can be considered acceptable because there were only two items in the scale (i.e., the minimum for a scale).

⁹To support averaging these items into a single unified scale, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis and examined the extent to which the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability or internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$).

¹⁰A correlation coefficient represents the linear relationship between two variables. The absolute value of a correlation coefficient ranges from 0.00 to 1.00, with higher values representing a stronger relationship between the two variables. A positive correlation indicates that, as scores on one variable increases, scores on the other variable also tends to increase. A negative correlation indicates that, as scores on one variable increases, scores on the other variable tends to decrease.

¹¹While we found a statistically significant result for this set of items, the results were not practically significant.

References

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