



Strengthening Black Representation in National Security

Yanique Campbell, Nathan Dial, Kyle Hutzler, and Kenya James

A diverse national security workforce is a national security imperative. Despite heightened efforts to address diversity in national security, gaps in attraction, retention, and promotion remain pronounced. As each of the four co-authors reflects on our journeys thus far, it is striking that each is a beneficiary of a program designed to recruit and cultivate diverse leaders.

Our successes should be as much a cause for celebrating the programs as a cause for concern about our continuing reliance on it to make up for the gaps in mainstream recruitment and talent development. Each of us looks ahead to the next stage of our careers with concern that progress in diversifying the national security workforce is stalling.

Underproducing Black Talent

Our decisions to pursue careers in national security were highly circumstantial, reinforcing how uncommon this path is for peers of color, who are no less talented. Many young people from minority backgrounds would likely be interested in national security career paths if engaged earlier and more concertedly. Some are discouraged from pursuing important entry-level opportunities due to pervasive underpaid internships that privilege applicants from wealthier backgrounds.

In a new analysis based on data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, we estimate that the United States underproduces 1,500 Black national security professionals from the country's colleges and universities yearly. This estimate is derived from figures estimating Black Americans' share of all college graduates at 8.9% and their share of graduates with national security-related degrees at 4.7%. (We define national security-related degrees as international relations and national security studies, area studies, or foreign languages.)

While Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) produce a disproportionate share of Black STEM talent, they underproduce national security graduates, accounting for only 2% of Black national security graduates compared to 11% of Black degrees earned overall in 2020. Underproduction at HBCUs is partially the product of an absence of national security degree offerings: 15% produced a mere one national security graduate in 2020, as compared to 40% of non-HBCUs. (Notably, three-quarters of the HBCUs captured have an ROTC program, nearly twice the proportion of non-HBCUs, suggesting an opportunity for national security agencies beyond the Department of Defense to increase their engagement.)

HBCUs alone cannot close the gap; indeed, if they graduated Black students with national security degrees in the same proportion as Black students overall, it would only close 15% of the difference. Several non-HBCUs are notable for suffering a gap between their share of overall versus Black national security degree holders. The ten institutions with the largest underrepresentation gaps account for 10.7% of all national security graduates, but only 4.2% of Black national security graduates, a gap of 2.5 times.¹ Other factors, such as entrance testing, also have a disparate impact on Black Americans' ability to enter the national security workforce and as such, they merit closer scrutiny. The State Department has noticed this trend and as a result, recently reformed the role of the Foreign Service Exam.

Failing to Promote, Retain, and Look Elsewhere

Upon entering the national security workforce, minorities continue to face barriers in career development. Even without intentional bias, the lack of mentors causes minorities to feel isolated or misunderstood. Highlighting that barriers to advancement persist for minorities at multiple levels, a Department of the Air Force Inspector General report found that 40% of surveyed Black enlisted men and women, officers, and civilians do not trust the chain of command to address racism, bias, and unequal opportunities. The most alarming disparity is that Black enlisted service members are twice as likely to be involuntarily discharged for misconduct as compared to White enlisted service members.²

Their assignments can also be career-limiting. In the State Department, African Americans have disproportionately served in Sub-Saharan Africa.³ A Government Accountability Office study of State Department promotion rates from 2002-2018 found that White employees enjoyed promotion rates 1.1 to 4.4 percentage points higher than racial or ethnic minorities, depending upon the level. This was the case even when controlling for factors such as time in grade, hardship assignments, veteran status, or graduation from an elite college.⁴ In the military, a similar dynamic exists with respect to over-representation in support versus combat functions with higher senior promotion potential.⁵

The inevitable result is a struggle to retain talent. Despite high-profile appointments over the past two decades, progress in growing the broader Black national security workforce has stagnated. From 2002-2018, the share of Black Foreign Service Officers increased just one percentage point to 7%, trailing the current 13% Black share of the U.S. population overall.⁶

Even as we seek to grow the early career pipeline, we shouldn't fail to ignore the large pool of qualified mid- and senior-career professionals who have left the national security workforce or others without prior experience who wish to serve. Increasing opportunities for these professionals would benefit all races, but we believe they would help Black Americans in particular.

Think tanks are one of the few established mid-career rebound opportunities, effectively serving as a "government in waiting" while sustaining and deepening practitioners' knowledge and networks. Here the gaps in employment for Black national security professionals are no less pronounced. The important and seldom acknowledged role of fundraising in think tank operations is a structural disadvantage against many mid- and senior-career Black Americans, whose networks are often less robust.

Calls to Action

While our experiences as Black and Afro-Caribbean Americans inform this paper, we acknowledge the challenges encountered by other racial and ethnic minorities and support efforts for full inclusion no less fervently. Making a concerted effort to attract, recruit, and retain a diverse array of national security professionals should pay dividends for the United States' foreign policy in multiple forms. Abroad, a younger and more diverse national security force will reflect shifts in the world's balance of power and enable the United States to better engage a wider range of countries. At home, it will directly connect the work of maintaining our national security to a broader range of domestic policy issues and communities. Our direct experiences with and profound historical awareness of human rights violations and institutionalized racism are particularly relevant in an era of global democratic backsliding. Having a variety of races and ethnicities within national security ranks at all levels will bolster the credibility of the United States in defending democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Multiple stakeholders, including educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the federal government, have the opportunity to strengthen diversity in national security at all stages of the talent pipeline. Investment in diverse talent must begin well before university by ensuring equitable access to language and world studies courses in middle and high schools. Similarly, non-governmental organizations, such as local World Affairs Councils, can redouble their efforts to engage diverse communities through programs such as Model UN. Think

tanks should endeavor to increase the transparency of the racial composition of their staff, improve outreach to underrepresented communities, adopt more standardized early career internship and full-time hiring processes, and increase paid opportunities.

The federal government has already undertaken various initiatives to advance diversity within the State Department and Department of Defense, among other agencies. Most recently, in June 2021, President Joe Biden signed [Executive Order \(EO\) 14305](#) to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the federal workforce.⁷ EO 14305 requires each institution to review, explain, and articulate a plan to improve its DEIA efforts within one year. The opportunity for improved data collection allows for more evidence-based approaches to hiring, promotion, development, and retention barriers.

The federal government can improve attraction and broaden the pipeline in a number of additional ways. First, it can ensure that all national security internships are paid, as a proposed bipartisan bill requires for the State Department.⁸ Next, it can further strengthen recruitment collaborations with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and pursue non-traditional partnerships, such as those with Black Greek Organizations (BGOs). The Biden administration already sees the value in partnering with BGOs via [the strategic alliance memorandum](#) signed in June 2022 with the U.S. Small Business Administration.⁹ The partnership is the first of its kind and shows the power and reach of BGOs within the Black community.

Minority communities would particularly stand to gain from more mid-career entry points, including efforts to encourage the return of diverse alumni to public service. The federal government can further cultivate an already promising talent pool at the city diplomacy level, whose practitioners are often more diverse than at the federal level. With respect to retention, the federal government could bolster the importance of keeping talented staff in personnel evaluations and incentivize managers. Agencies can more uniformly adopt best practices in formal mentorship programs.

Institutions should clearly articulate the expectations for mentors and mentees within their organization to aid the individual level. The expectation of mentorship removes the barrier for minorities to ask for guidance from more senior ranks and encourages senior leaders to invest in minorities at lower levels. Providing expectations sets the standard that mentorship is an expectation for leaders and creates the scope for the mentee and mentor relationship. As a result, the organization can track who does and does not have a mentor and evaluate which leaders are investing in advancing younger workers. In all, transparency and tracking of mentorship provides a foundation for institutions to ensure that Black national security professionals who enter an organization have the greatest opportunity to gain the requisite guidance to reach their full potential.

Above all, what is needed are clear, ambitious goals for a truly diverse national security community and an enduring, bipartisan commitment to realize them. The United States' greatest potential comparative advantage lies in its diversity. It is time we turn that potential energy into positive kinetic use.

Yanique Campbell is a Foreign Service Officer at the U.S. Department of State.

Nathan Dial is an Active-Duty Major in the U.S. Air Force.

Kyle Hutzler is a consultant at McKinsey & Company.

Kenya James is a Foreign Service Officer at the U.S. Department of State.

¹ Conversely, the ten institutions that outperform on Black representation graduate 14% of Black national security graduates, while graduating only 6.9% of national security graduates overall. At the institutional level, George Washington University and American University produced the most Black national security graduates in 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Education data.

² Inspector General of the Department of the Air Force, "Report of Inquiry: Independent Racial Disparity Review," December 2020, <https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/ig/IRDR.pdf>.

- ³ Association of Black American Ambassadors, "Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Foreign Service: Recommendations for Action," *The Foreign Service Journal*, January-February 2021, <https://www.afsa.org/sites/default/files/fsj-2021-01-02-january-february.pdf>.
- ⁴ United States Government Accountability Office, "State Department: Additional Steps Are Needed to Identify Potential Barriers to Diversity," January 2020, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-237.pdf>.
- ⁵ Hise Gibson and Daniel White, "The Strategic Problem the Army Doesn't Seem to Care About: African Americans Aren't Branching Combat Arms," Modern War Institute, July 14, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-problem-army-doesnt-seem-care-african-americans-arent-branching-combat-arms/>.
- ⁶ Robert McMahon, "Can the State Department Bring More Diversity to the U.S. Diplomatic Corps?," Council on Foreign Relations, February 18, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/can-state-department-bring-more-diversity-us-diplomatic-corps>.
- ⁷ "President Biden Signs Executive Order Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Government," The White House, June 25, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/25/fact-sheet-president-biden-signs-executive-order-advancing-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-government/>.
- ⁸ Department of State Student Internship Program Act, S.599, 117th Congress. (2021). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/599>.
- ⁹ "U.S. Small Business Administration Announces Landmark Collaboration with Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities to Address the Wealth Gap Through Black Entrepreneurship," U.S. Small Business Administration, June 14, 2022, <https://www.sba.gov/article/2022/jun/14/us-small-business-administration-announces-landmark-collaboration-historically-black-fraternities>.