

Finessing the dropout count

Thousands of recruits don't show up on the rolls of diploma-less

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

The Army in recent years has quietly enlisted tens of thousands of high school dropouts beyond the cap set by Defense Department policy.

Using a controversial questionnaire that screens for potential enlistees' "motivational levels," recruiters since 2000 have been allowed to sign up promising applicants who don't have high school diplomas. Moreover, they have not had to count them against the DoD's annual limit that holds enlistments of non-high school graduates to a maximum 10 percent of all new non-prior-service recruits.

That means the Army effectively can double the estimated 7,100 non-high school graduates it enlists under DoD policy this fiscal year to 14,200 non-prior-service members through the "Tier-Two Attrition Screen" program, Army spokesman Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty confirmed.

Enlistees without diplomas who sign up through this program are those who post high scores on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery given to all new recruits and who meet other criteria, including scoring in the top 30 percent of the Assessment of Individual Motivation questionnaire.

27 questions to answer

The AIM questionnaire, part of the Tier-Two Attrition Screen, poses 27 questions to potential recruits to gauge their dependability, work ethic, leadership traits and physical conditioning.

The Tier-Two Attrition Screen was adopted in April 2005 and is based on an Army Research Institute study that indicates a combination of traits in a potential recruit serves as a good screening measure to cut down washout rates typically associated with non-high school graduates. High school dropouts average a 52 percent washout rate during their first three years in service, versus 35 percent for enlistees with diplomas, according to "Success of First-Term Soldiers: The Effects of Recruiting Practices and Recruit Characteristics."

If deemed successful, the Tier-Two Attrition Screen program could become policy for all services to judge potential recruits who have not earned a high school diploma.

One expert in military personnel issues said the program's "results so far ... are great."

"The recruits look just like those with high school diplomas," said Bruce Orvis, Rand Corp.'s Man-

power and Training Program director.

Enlisting more non-high school graduates is important to the Army, given that dropouts "make up 20 percent of the youth population," Orvis said.

But Army service also is a chance for many nongraduates who may be potential high achievers but who left school early for valid reasons — such as taking care of a family member or working full time to help support their families.

The Tier-Two Attrition Screen provides a quick group of promising candidates, but follows a series of Army moves to boost recruiting that have drawn criticism as lowering standards for who gets to wear the uniform — allowing recruits with visible tattoos to enlist, recruiting soldiers with criminal waivers or bringing in soldiers who score poorly on the ASVAB.

Some recruits enlisted under the attrition screen program have a General Equivalency Diploma, some are home-schooled and some have college credits despite the lack of a high school diploma. But some are dropouts, and they are placed for up to a year in the Delayed Entry Program and required to earn GEDs before they are shipped to basic training.

So far this fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, an estimated 6,000 people without diplomas have been recruited.

That, Orvis said, is good news after the disappointing results of the program's precursor, called GED Plus. More than 20,000 recruits without diplomas were allowed in through that program from 2000 to 2004 but performed no better than troops with GEDs have traditionally performed: About half washed out before the end of their first year.

More recruits required

But this year, recruiters must bring in 80,000 new troops, part of the Army's ongoing campaign to grow its total end strength to 512,000 troops, an addition of 30,000 soldiers. If recruiters can do that while keeping the number of GED soldiers who don't make it through their first 12 months at the same level as high school graduates — or about 17.6 percent — they've scored a coup.

Both the abandoned GED Plus effort and the current attrition screen program have in common the Assessment of Individual Motivation test, which was created by the Army and Rand in the early 1990s and is administered to all new recruits.

Each of AIM's 27 questions asks

the potential recruit to sort through several answers and pick two responses that are most like the recruit's lifestyle and two that are not. The recruit may have answers like, "I have almost always completed projects on time," or "I have not exercised regularly."

AIM was criticized when it was used as part of GED Plus because recruits could score high by selecting the obviously more favorable answer.

"They're traditionally very easy to respond to," said Eric Heggstad, a University of North Carolina psychology professor who helped conduct the GED Plus study. "If your choice includes, 'I'm a hard worker,' what are you going to say?"

Orvis said as a result, 97 percent of recruits passed the test, making it a failure in weeding out potential washouts. Indeed, the washout rates were as high as before AIM was adopted.

"So [the Army Research Institute] went back to the drawing board," Orvis said.

The Army ended up keeping the questions but tightening the scoring — and that has proven to be the right move, Heggstad said.

The new scoring factored in the results of a study written by Mark Young of the Army Research Institute using the research of Heggstad and others.

In the study of 20,000 soldiers from 2001 to 2003, researchers found that those who scored in the top 30 percent of a combination of screening factors — low body mass index, high verbal and math ASVAB scores, and high motivation test scores — had 12-month attrition rates in the same range as those soldiers who had graduated from high school.

They used the test results of soldiers who completed their full first terms to create a new way to score AIM. The study found that a recruit who answers honestly that he doesn't always finish projects might be the one who tends to stay in, rather than the recruit who gives a series of "I'm great at everything" answers.

"We were able to make better decisions about who's going to leave the military early," Heggstad said. "We were able to get some of them to look like [high school graduates]."

"By definition, only 30 percent can pass it," Orvis said. "It's a nice, pleasant surprise after a lot of work went into it."

After a year's worth of statistics, the Tier-Two Attrition Screen recruits have proven they're doing well — well enough



SHEILA VEMMER/STAFF

Since 2000, recruiters have been allowed to sign up promising applicants who don't have high school diplomas without having to count them against the Defense Department's limit.

within the first six months for the office of the secretary of defense to increase the cap on the study from 5 percent to 10 percent, Orvis said.

The study ends in September. Although the thousands of non-high school grads brought into the Army under this program are not counted as such statistically, they are included as part of the Army's total end-strength numbers.

In reports to the secretary of defense and Congress, the extra recruits appear as an asterisk next to the official number of GED earners.

"The agreement was, 'This looks pretty promising, so we'll let you

go around the cap for another 10 percent,'" Orvis said.

For the future, the Army Research Institute is looking at using the same measures to screen other groups of recruits who normally wouldn't meet recruiting standards, such as high school graduates with low aptitude scores.

And, if the pool of recruits improves, those same measures might be used to screen out applicants with high attrition rates. In other words, high school graduates would be held to the same standards.

"If it really works well," Orvis said, "maybe you won't need the diploma as a screener anymore." □