

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense (DOD) has emphasized the importance of developing language skills and knowledge of foreign cultures to meet current and future needs and is investing millions of dollars to provide language and culture predeployment training to its general purpose forces. DOD has also noted that such training should be viewed as a long-term investment and that training and personnel systems should better account for the knowledge and skills of service members acquired through training to help manage its forces. The committee report accompanying a proposed bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011 (H.R. 5136) directed GAO to review language and culture training for Army and Marine Corps general purpose forces. For this report, GAO evaluated the extent to which these services (1) captured information in training and personnel systems on the completion of language and culture predeployment training and proficiency gained from training and (2) developed plans to sustain language skills acquired through predeployment training. GAO analyzed service documents and interviewed cognizant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made recommendations intended to improve the availability of information on training completion and proficiency and help DOD plan for sustainment training. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations, but stated that the definition of significant language training was not intended to describe training for initial skills. However, DOD noted that current guidance does not preclude language proficiency testing at this stage.

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LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TRAINING

Opportunities Exist to Improve Visibility and Sustainment of Knowledge and Skills in Army and Marine Corps General Purpose Forces

What GAO Found

The Army and Marine Corps have documented some information at the unit level for service members who completed language and culture predeployment training, but the services have not fully captured information within service-level training and personnel systems on service members who completed training or their corresponding proficiency. DOD and service guidance require the services to document language and culture training completion and proficiency gained from training in service-level systems. However, GAO identified several factors that limited the services' ability to implement this guidance. For example, the Army's primary training system did not have data fields for all mandatory language and culture tasks and, as a result, units were unable to document the completion of this training. In addition, while the Army collects some language proficiency data within its primary personnel system, the Army considers these data unreliable because of weaknesses in its approach to collecting them. To improve the accuracy of information within this system, the Army established a task force in January 2011, which has identified a number of key tasks and is at varying stages of completing its work. The Marine Corps did not document language and culture predeployment training completion in any servicewide training or personnel system and a system has not been designated for this purpose. Further, the Marine Corps had not required marines who completed significant language training to take formal proficiency tests and, therefore, the service did not have language proficiency data for these marines. By not capturing information within service-level training and personnel systems on the training that general purpose forces have completed and the language proficiency gained from training, the Army and Marine Corps do not have the information they need to effectively leverage the language and culture knowledge and skills of these forces when making individual assignments and assessing future operational needs.

The Army and Marine Corps have not developed plans to sustain language skills already acquired through predeployment training. The services have made considerable investments to provide some service members with extensive predeployment language training. For example, as of July 2011, over 800 soldiers have completed about 16 weeks of Afghan language training since 2010 at a cost of about \$12 million. DOD and service guidance address the need to sustain language skills and the DOD strategic plan for language, regional, and culture skills calls for the services to build on existing language skills for future needs. However, GAO found that the services had not yet determined which service members require follow-on language training to sustain skills, the amount of training required, or appropriate mechanisms to deliver the training. Although informal follow-on training programs were available to sustain language skills, such as computer-based training, these programs were voluntary. In the absence of formal sustainment training programs to maintain and build upon service members' language skills, the Army and Marine Corps may miss opportunities to capitalize on the investments they have already made to provide predeployment language training for ongoing operations.