

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-654](#), a report to congressional requesters.

Why GAO Did This Study

State's Foreign Service promotion process follows an up-or-out principle, under which failure to gain promotion to higher rank within a specified time leads to mandatory retirement for personnel in certain occupational categories. State's OIG and the Foreign Service Grievance Board identified procedural concerns relating to the process in 2010.

GAO was asked to review the Foreign Service promotion process. This report examines (1) State's process for ranking and promoting Foreign Service personnel, (2) procedural changes State has made to its Foreign Service promotion process in response to identified concerns, and (3) the extent to which updated procedures were consistently followed in 2011 and 2012 and whether any notable concerns about the promotion process remain. GAO reviewed laws and procedures; analyzed selection, performance standards, and reconstituted board files as well as grievance case files for the 2011 and 2012 promotion cycles; interviewed State officials; and contacted 2011 and 2012 board members to offer them an opportunity to comment on the process.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State take actions to ensure full implementation of promotion process internal controls. State concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-13-654](#). For more information, contact Michael J. Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

July 2013

FOREIGN AFFAIRS MANAGEMENT

State Department Has Strengthened Foreign Service Promotion Process Internal Controls, but Documentation Gaps Remain

What GAO Found

The Department of State's (State) Foreign Service promotion process includes convening several types of boards to evaluate candidates for promotion and identify other candidates for possible separation from the Service. State has a separate process to address related grievances. Selection boards review all candidates and sort them into one of three categories: promotable, mid-ranked, and low-ranked. The selection boards produce rank-ordered lists of those candidates recommended for promotion, and a "cut line" is subsequently determined based on the number of available promotion slots. Before announcing promotions, State vets all recommended candidates to determine whether there are outstanding issues, such as a pending investigation, that can lead to their removal from the promotion list. Subsequently, State convenes performance standards boards to assess low-ranked candidates for possible separation from the Service. There are several mechanisms to address grievances relating to the promotion process. For example, State may initiate reconstituted boards to reassess candidates if a board failed to follow the procedures or if the underlying performance information contained omissions or inaccuracies. Employees not satisfied with grievance outcomes can file an appeal with the Foreign Service Grievance Board.

In response to concerns identified by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Foreign Service Grievance Board in 2010, State has taken a number of actions to strengthen its Foreign Service promotion process internal controls. For example, in response to concerns about improper introduction of information about candidates, State instituted a requirement that board members sign an oath to adhere to the promotion criteria and protect the confidentiality of board materials. State also revised its procedures governing recusal requests, thereby broadening the provisions under which a candidate can request an individual board member's recusal from reviewing their file. In addition, State updated its reconstituted board procedures, outlining a set of required documents, such as signed board member score sheets, to be included in each board's official record. In addition to actions taken in response to others' identified concerns, State initiated other practices to strengthen promotion process safeguards, such as including selection board and reconstituted board member recusal memos in the final board report.

GAO found that Foreign Service selection boards, performance standards boards, and reconstituted boards complied with many of State's updated procedures in the 2011 and 2012 Foreign Service promotion cycles, but some board reports had documentation gaps for certain internal controls. For example, all 41 selection board reports we reviewed included a signed memo certifying final results. However, only 29 of 41 selection boards had signed oaths from all board members, and 45 of 122 required oaths were missing from 2012 selection board reports. In addition, some board reports lacked documentation of some recusal requests. The absence of a fully documented system of controls increases the risk that intentional or unintentional failures to implement safeguards, by board members or State Human Resources staff, may go undetected and uncorrected. Such a failure to implement safeguards, in turn, increases the risk that the integrity of promotion results could be intentionally or inadvertently compromised.