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Defense Primer: Military Service Academies

Overview

The U.S. military service academies are tuition-free, four-year degree-granting institutions operated by the military departments. The academies are a major officer commissioning source, along with the Reserve Officer Training Corps and Officer Candidate School. The military service academies include the:

- U.S. Military Academy (USMA), West Point, New York, under the Department of the Army;
- U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), Annapolis, Maryland, under the Department of the Navy (Navy and Marine Corps); and
- U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), Colorado Springs, Colorado, under the Department of the Air Force (Air Force and Space Force).

There are two other federal service academies, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, in New London, Connecticut, under the Department of Homeland Security; and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Kings Point, New York, under the Department of Transportation. While graduates of these service academies may also receive an officer commission upon graduation, they differ from the military service academies in many respects (e.g., statutory authorities, application and acceptance processes).

Academy Oversight and Leadership

The military academies are overseen by three entities: the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD/P&R), the service Secretaries, and the Board of Visitors (BoV) of each academy. OUSD/P&R is responsible for assessing academy operations and establishing policies and guidance for uniform oversight and management of the academies. The BoV serves as an independent advisory body on matters related to morale, discipline, social climate, curriculum, instruction, physical equipment, fiscal affairs, and academic methods. By statute, the BoV for each military academy includes three Members from both the House and Senate, and the Chairs of the Armed Services Committees or their designees. Two of the Senate appointees must be members of the Committee on Appropriations. The President appoints six additional members to the Board.

All of the academies are led by a superintendent, a military officer who is a general or admiral *detailed* (selected) to the position by the President. By law, the superintendent serves

for a minimum of three years in the position. In 1999 (P.L. 105-65§532), Congress added a requirement that the superintendent must retire from service at the end of the appointment, although waivers are available in some cases.

Admissions

Admission to the service academies is competitive. In order to be appointed to a service academy, an applicant must meet certain eligibility requirements and be nominated by an authorized person. Categories of nominations include congressional, service-connected, academy superintendents and others. Allocations for nominations are governed by law. The military academies use a “whole person” approach to admissions by assessing candidates in three areas: academics, physical aptitude, and leadership potential. To matriculate, a nominated applicant must be a U.S. citizen, between 17 and 25 years old, unmarried, without legal obligation to support any dependents, and not pregnant.

Foreign National Students

Limited numbers of foreign national students are admitted each year. By statute, a maximum of 60 may be enrolled at each academy. Candidates must exhibit proficiency in English and high marks on standardized academic tests. The Department of State and DOD determine eligible countries, and invite these nations to nominate promising candidates. Foreign students return to their host nation following graduation and may incur a service obligation with their country’s military.

Preparatory Schools

Each military department operates a preparatory school that offers a 10-month curriculum of instruction, in English, mathematics, science, and other academic areas, tailored to the student’s needs and entrance requirements for each academy. Individuals do not apply directly to the prep school; they are selected from the pool of applicants to the service academies. Initially conceived as a program to help selected enlisted soldiers and sailors prepare academically to meet the entrance standards, Congress and DOD have also considered them as an avenues to increase access to the academies for historically disadvantaged demographic groups.

Enrollment

The student limit for each academy is 4,400 and each of the academies admits between 1,100 and 1,350 students per year. Women first entered the academies in 1976 and now account for 23-30% of each academy’s student body. **Table 1** shows demographics by race and ethnicity.

Table I. Service Academy and U.S. Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multi	Other/Unk.
USMA	64%	12%	10%	8%	3%	3%
USNA	61%	7%	12%	7%	10%	2%
USAFA	64%	7%	11%	6%	7%	5%
U.S. Postsecondary Institutions	56%	13%	14%	7%	4%	7%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator.

Notes: Academy data are from Fall 2019. Data for U.S. postsecondary institutions are from the 2018-2019 academic program year for degree-granting, primarily baccalaureate or above institutions and does not include non-resident aliens. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. “Multi” includes two or more races, “Other/Unk” includes Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, American Indian, or Alaska Natives.

Academic Curriculum and Student Life

While enrolled at the academies, students have the rank of midshipman (Navy) or cadet (Air Force and Army) and are considered to be on active duty (10 U.S.C. § 101(d)). They live in military barracks, wear uniforms, and participate in military training and professional development on a daily basis. In addition, academy students participate in approximately six weeks of basic training in the summer prior to their first academic year, and specialized training in subsequent summers between academic years. The academies also have elements similar to civilian colleges and universities (e.g., varsity sports programs, social and professional clubs and associations, and alumni-focused programs and fundraising).

The core curriculum at all academies includes professional development (e.g., military leadership and ethics) and service-specific technical courses (e.g., Naval weapons systems, aeronautical engineering). While students may select from several majors, including those in the humanities and social sciences, all successful graduates are awarded a Bachelor of Science degree due to the technical content of the core curriculum.

Service Requirement

Upon graduation from the academies, cadets and midshipmen are required to accept an appointment as a commissioned officer, if tendered, and incur a military service obligation (MSO) in the active/reserve component. The MSO is typically eight years total with a minimum of five years on active duty. Congress has modified the active duty service requirement in the past, most recently in 1989 (P.L. 101-189) when the requirement was raised from five to six years for the class of 1992. It was reduced to five years in the FY1996 NDAA (P.L. 104-106). Arguments for modifying the MSO typically stem from return on investment and force-sizing concerns.

Students who voluntarily leave the academies or are dismissed for substandard conduct or performance may be required to complete a period of active duty enlisted service, to reimburse the federal government for the cost of their education. Those who fail to complete the MSO might also be required to reimburse the government.

Funding

Students at the academies receive fully-funded tuition, room and board, and some military pay and benefits. The services estimate that the cost per four-year graduate ranges

from \$400,000 to \$600,000 in current dollars. Congress authorizes and appropriates funding for the service academies through multiple appropriation titles and accounts of each respective service. For example, pay and allowances for military staff and cadets and midshipmen are part of the Military Personnel (MILPERS) appropriations. Operations and Maintenance (O&M) funds provide for academy programs, security, facility maintenance and upgrades, training, and other operational expenses. Military Construction (MILCON) appropriations provide for construction of academic buildings and barracks/lodging and can vary from year to year.

Issues for Congress

Oversight of the military service academies poses complex challenges for Congress. From a budget perspective, there is significant campus infrastructure to maintain and upgrade, including numerous historical buildings and monuments. On the personnel side, as undergraduate universities, the academies have experienced similar disciplinary issues and problematic behaviors as seen in civilian college campuses (e.g., sexual misconduct, binge drinking, and cheating scandals). In addition, some in Congress have expressed interest in issues related to demographic diversity in academy appointments, particularly for historically underrepresented groups. Additionally, as a primary commissioning source, Congress may consider how well the academy curriculum and professional development programs prepare cadets and midshipmen to take on the responsibilities and challenges of 21st century military service.

CRS Products

CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*, by R. Eric Petersen and Sarah J. Eckman

Relevant Statute

Title 10, United States Code, Chapters 753 (USMA), 853 (USNA), and 954 (USAFA)

Kristy N. Kamarck, Specialist in Military Manpower
Hibbah Kaileh, Research Assistant

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