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Defense Primer: Senior Reserve Officers' Training Corps

Background

The Senior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (SROTC)—more commonly referred to as the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)—is an officer training and scholarship program for postsecondary students authorized under Chapter 103 of Title 10 of the United States Code. By enrolling in ROTC, students can pursue an undergraduate degree while also training to become U.S. military officers. The military departments—Army, Air Force, and Navy—manage their own ROTC programs, which are hosted at civilian universities and colleges. The Navy ROTC program includes a Marine Corps option and the Air Force program allows for commissions to the Space Force. The military departments provide scholarships and other forms of financial assistance to participating students. In return, students commit to accept an appointment as an officer in the U.S. military upon graduation.

The Coast Guard, part of the Department of Homeland Security, does not have an ROTC program, but offers the College Student Pre-Commissioning Initiative (CSPI, 14 U.S.C. §2131) that awards scholarships to students at minority-serving institutions and subsequent placement in the Coast Guard Officer Candidate School upon graduation.

The ROTC program is the largest single source of commissioned officers, producing more than 8,500 officers annually. Other major commissioning sources include military service academies; Officer Candidate/Training Schools; and direct appointment. Approximately 75% of officers commissioned through ROTC are men, and the racial and ethnic background is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Officers Commissioned through ROTC by Race and Ethnicity; Academic Year 2021

	Army	Navy	Air Force
White	64.8%	73.3%	67.5%
Black	11.9%	4.0%	5.5%
Hispanic	12.5%	8.0%	11.3%
Asian	7.0%	6.6%	6.4%

Source: Government Accountability Office (GAO), GAO-23-105857, Table 2, p. 15.

Notes: Other racial/ethnic categories are omitted as they constituted less than 5% of the overall population.

Legislative History

During the Civil War, Congress passed the Land Grant Act of 1862 (P.L. 37-130; also called the Morrill Act) to address a shortage of trained military officers. The act provided funding and land to establish public colleges in each state. In turn, these colleges were to teach military tactics to future officers. However, the implementation and quality of military instruction across these schools lacked

standardization. The National Defense Act of 1916 (P.L. 65-84) abolished the land-grant system for military education and created an ROTC structure to standardize and enhance military training for the Army. In 1925, under P.L. 68-611, the Navy was allowed to participate in ROTC. Congress added a naval scholarship program in 1946 (P.L. 79-729).

In 1964, following a decline in ROTC enrollment, Congress passed the ROTC Vitalization Act (P.L. 88-647). The act standardized the program across the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and authorized the department secretaries to pay for participants' educational expenses. The military lifted restrictions on participation by women in ROTC programs in 1969 (Air Force) and 1972 (Army and Navy).

Past Controversies

Historically, ROTC programs have been seen by military and civilian stakeholders as an opportunity to augment force structure and foster civilian-military relations. At times, however, the presence of ROTC units and students on campus has been contentious. During the Vietnam War era, student antiwar protests were widespread, and several universities downgraded ROTC to an extracurricular activity, disallowed academic credit for ROTC coursework, or denied access to on-campus facilities and support. As a result, the military departments shuttered the ROTC programs at several of these universities.

In the 1990s, controversy around the ROTC program arose due to the Department of Defense's (DOD) policy toward gay individuals. This policy, known as Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), became law in 1993 as part of the FY1994 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 103-160, §571). Some faculty members and students criticized DADT for being discriminatory and some universities barred ROTC programs from their campuses.

In 1996, as part of the FY1996 NDAA (P.L. 104-106, §541), Congress passed legislation that denied certain federal funding to any higher education institution that prohibited or prevented the operation of ROTC units, recruiting activity, or student participation in ROTC on its campus. In 2010, DADT was repealed (P.L. 111-321), and several universities began to re-introduce ROTC programs.

Establishing ROTC Units

According to DOD policy, ROTC programs may be affiliated with schools in one of four ways

- *Host Unit:* all activities are located on that school's campus.
- *Extension Unit:* students are affiliated with another school's host unit but participate in activities and classes at their own institution.

- *Cross-Town Unit*: students can enroll in courses at a host unit at another university.
- *Consortium*: several schools partner to share resources (e.g., facilities and staff) and maximize efficiency.

According to GAO, there were approximately 1,441 schools with an ROTC host, cross-town, or extension unit between 2011 and 2021.

Schools that seek to establish an ROTC detachment can apply to the respective military department. Per 10 U.S.C. §2102, to be eligible for consideration a school must be accredited, and adopt “as a part of its curriculum, a four-year course of military instruction or a two-year course of advanced training of military instruction, or both.” The school must give the senior ROTC officer on campus the academic rank of professor and grant academic credit for ROTC courses. Once these conditions are met, the military department decides whether to establish an ROTC program, which, per DOD policy, “will be based on the most efficient allocation of limited resources to meet the specific needs of the Military Department concerned.”

Previous attempts by the military departments to close some ROTC units have been controversial. In 2013, the Army planned to close 13 ROTC detachments due to low enrollment which generated pushback from some Members of Congress and university alumni. The Army announced it would postpone the closures, and, in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2016 (P.L. 114-113, §8032), Congress prohibited the use of funds made available by the act for the disestablishment of any existing Army ROTC unit. This provision was included in subsequent annual appropriations bills through FY2020 (P.L. 116-93, §8033).

ROTC Curriculum

The ROTC program consists of a basic course and an advanced course. The basic course includes training and electives—including at least one military-related course per semester—during a student’s freshman and sophomore years. If a student enrolls in the basic course, there is no service obligation. However, if a student accepts a scholarship, then he or she incurs a service commitment. After completing the basic course, some students continue to the advanced course where they take additional electives and participate in field training. Curriculum requirements vary, as enrollees study military department-specific topics. For instance, enrollees in the Navy ROTC program are required to take naval science courses, while Air Force enrollees take courses in aerospace studies. Participants also attend summer training courses.

ROTC Funding

Congress appropriates money for the ROTC program through two accounts: Operation and Maintenance (O&M) and Military Personnel (MILPERS). According to DOD budget documents, enacted amounts for ROTC in FY2024 were \$870 million in O&M and \$164 million in MILPERS (see **Table 2**). O&M funding provides for scholarships, travel and per diem, contractual support, and other equipment or supply needs. MILPERS funding covers cadet and midshipman pay and allowances, uniforms, and stipends. More information on ROTC entitlements can be found in DOD’s Financial Management Regulation, Volume 7A, Chapter 59. ROTC military instructors receive

pay and benefits based on their rank and grade and are not included in the above figures.

Table 2. ROTC Funding (in thousands of dollars)

	FY2023 (actual)	FY2024 (enacted)	FY2025 (request)
MILPERS			
Army	\$76,956	\$104,684	\$105,500
Navy	\$19,962	\$22,326	\$22,230
Air Force	\$38,999	\$36,823	\$39,621
O&M			
Army	\$551,929	\$552,312	\$557,478
Navy	\$146,787	\$175,171	\$169,044
Air Force	\$114,773	\$142,647	\$129,859

Source: Military Budget Justification Books for Fiscal Year 2025. FY2024-enacted amounts are from the Joint Explanatory Statement of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024.

ROTC Participation and Scholarships

Postsecondary students can choose to participate in the ROTC program in one of two ways: they can (1) formally enroll in the program and attend ROTC courses, or (2) remain unenrolled but attend ROTC courses like any other university course. Students who formally enroll in the ROTC program can be either *noncontract* enrollees or *contract* enrollees. Noncontract enrollees are not obligated to serve in the Armed Forces, do not receive financial assistance (e.g., scholarships), and generally can only take freshman- and sophomore-level ROTC courses. Contract enrollees are obligated to serve in the Armed Forces and accept an appointment as a commissioned officer upon graduation. They are required to serve a specified number of years in the active and/or reserve component (per 10 U.S.C. §2107). In return for their service, the military departments help to cover contracted enrollees’ educational costs. However, if an enrollee breaks the commitment, he or she may have to reimburse the department for their educational expenses.

ROTC scholarships are merit-based, and help to cover all or a portion of tuition, fees, and other expenses (e.g., books, and living expenses) for two to four years. High school seniors can compete for ROTC scholarships at the national level. Postsecondary students enrolled in an institution with an ROTC affiliation can also compete for scholarships. Typically, qualification for scholarships is based on GPA, test scores, and certain medical and fitness standards.

Relevant Statute

Chapter 103 of Title 10, United States Code.

Other Resources

DOD Instruction 1215.08, Senior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) Programs.

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