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Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: Member Office Management Considerations

Members of Congress are authorized by law to nominate candidates for appointment to four U.S. service academies: the U.S. Military Academy (USMA); U.S. Naval Academy (USNA); U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA); and U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA). A fifth service academy, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy (USCGA), does not require a congressional nomination for appointment. These institutions provide college-age Americans with a tuition-free, four-year undergraduate education and prepare them to be officers of some of the U.S. uniformed services. Upon graduation, service academy graduates are commissioned as officers in the active or reserve components of the military or the merchant marine for a minimum of five years.

This In Focus provides some management considerations for addressing service academy nominations, a timeline for congressional nomination actions (**Figure 1**), and statutory and regulatory requirements for allocating congressional nominations to service academies. Additional information is available in CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*, CRS In Focus IF13219, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: Candidate Qualifications and Noncongressional Nominating Authorities*, and CRS Infographic IG10096, *U.S. Service Academy Nominations: Timelines*.

Congressional Considerations

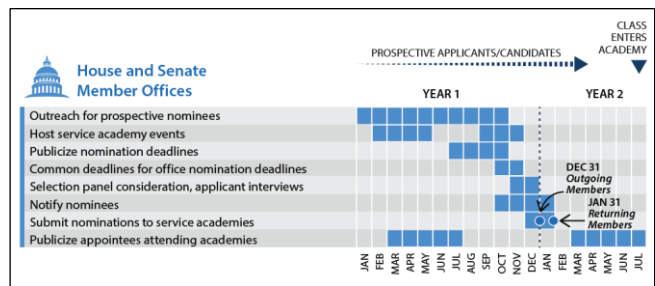
The nomination of constituents to one of the service academies can provide Members of Congress with the opportunity to perform community outreach and other representational activities. In some states and congressional districts, nominations are highly competitive. Others are less competitive, and some offices do not receive expressions of interest from enough applicants to fill the number of nominations allocated. As a result, some congressional offices may need to dedicate considerable staff resources to the selection process to identify qualified candidates, while others can incorporate service academy nominations alongside other constituent service activities.

The nomination authorities, number of appointments, and criteria establishing the qualifications of potential service academy appointees are set in statute, federal regulations, and policies established by each academy. Each congressional office with nominating authority can develop its own process for managing its service academy nominations and selecting nominees.

Some congressional offices have adapted and modified approaches like those used by USMA, USNA, USAFA, and

USMMA to make their nomination decisions. These might include evaluation of several broad components of a potential nominee’s qualifications for appointment, such as character, scholarship, leadership, physical aptitude, and motivation. Other congressional offices reach decisions through the consideration of a candidate’s academic preparation, extracurricular participation, and community service, and the recommendations of those familiar with their activities in those areas. To make these assessments, congressional offices often require prospective nominees to apply, which can be a combination of self-reported qualifications and additional documentary materials.

Figure 1. Academy Nominations Timeline for Member Offices



Source: CRS compilation based on information from the service academies’ websites and congressional guides. Graphic created by Brion Long, Visual Information Specialist.

Notes: Timeline provides generalized information representing when events and activities most frequently occur.

In addition to establishing criteria for nomination decisions, each congressional Member office may determine how to administer the nomination decisionmaking process. Some offices handle nominations internally, assigning the task of managing applicant files and developing nomination recommendations to a staff member. Other offices assign staff to oversee nomination-related activities but delegate the screening and development of nomination recommendations to a volunteer panel. A nominations review panel could include educators, service academy alumni, representatives of veterans’ groups, and other community leaders from a Member’s state or district. The use of volunteers in congressional offices is governed by regulations issued by the Select Committee on Ethics in the Senate and by the Committees on House Administration and Ethics in the House.

The service academies offer guidance and support for congressional Member offices regarding the nomination and appointment process. Coordination with the service academies may help Members of Congress assist constituents throughout the appointment process. The

service academies, for example, may be able to help identify prospective nominees or academy alumni, and clarify institutional policies. The service academies may encourage congressional Member offices to host Academy Days in their districts, which are informational sessions for prospective nominees, similar to college admissions fairs.

Appointment Criteria

Appointment and nomination criteria for the service academies are established by statute, regulations issued by the appropriate executive branch authority, and policies set by each academy. Three service academies—USMA, USNA, and USAFA—are housed in the military branches of the Department of Defense (DOD). (Pursuant to Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025, DOD is also “using a secondary Department of War designation.”) USMMA is governed by regulations issued by the Department of Transportation.

Department of Defense Academies

Three service academies—USMA, USNA, and USAFA—are overseen by three military branches of the DOD. Allocations for nominations by Members of Congress of prospective appointees to these academies are established by statute and are substantially similar for each academy. The number of positions, or charges, subject to congressional nomination at each DOD academy includes

- 10 from each state, 5 of whom are nominated by each Senator from that state;
- 5 from each congressional district, nominated by the Representative from the district;
- 5 from the District of Columbia, nominated by the Delegate from the District of Columbia;
- 4 from the U.S. Virgin Islands, nominated by the Delegate from the U.S. Virgin Islands;
- 6 from Puerto Rico, 5 of whom are nominated by the Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico, and 1 who is a native of Puerto Rico nominated by the Governor of Puerto Rico;
- 5 from Guam, nominated by the Delegate from Guam;
- 3 from American Samoa, nominated by the Delegate from American Samoa; and
- 3 from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, nominated by the Delegate from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

When a congressionally nominated academy position is vacant, a Member of Congress may nominate up to 15 people for possible appointment. As DOD service academy cadets or midshipmen who received a congressional nomination graduate, or as their appointments are otherwise terminated, a nominating Member office can make new nominations to fill any vacated positions in the next regular admissions period. Typically, one appointment per DOD academy per Senator and Representative is available annually. In some years, however, a congressional office might have the opportunity to make nominations to fill

multiple vacancies at an academy. The service academies can provide congressional offices with information about the number of appointments available for Members to nominate.

Nominees to DOD service academies may be submitted by Members of Congress in three categories: without ranking, with a principal candidate and nine ranked alternates, or with a principal candidate and nine unranked alternates. When the Member specifies a principal candidate, that individual is to be appointed to a DOD academy if he or she meets all other admission criteria. If the principal candidate is disqualified, the service academy is to appoint the first fully qualified, ranked alternate, if specified by the Member. In circumstances where Members do not specify a principal candidate or ranked alternates, one individual from among the Member’s nominees who is found to be fully qualified is to be appointed by the academies to serve as a cadet or midshipman.

Congressional nominees who are not initially offered appointments and are designated by the academies as qualified alternates may receive an appointment via a noncongressional authority. Nominees who are not initially offered academy appointments may be offered admission to an academy preparatory program. These are one-year programs, hosted at other military schools. Students who complete the preparatory program can reapply to the academy and seek renomination during the appropriate admissions cycle. Noncongressional appointees from a Member’s state or district are not counted as part of the Member’s statutory allotment of appointees, nor are students appointed to an academy prep school.

United States Merchant Marine Academy

Members of Congress nominate individuals for appointment to USMMA. The number of seats in an entering class at this service academy is allocated by regulation issued by the Secretary of Transportation (46 C.F.R. 310.53), who is also the appointment authority for the academy. Under the regulation, each Member of Congress may nominate 10 candidates per vacancy to compete for admission to the academy. Members of the House of Representatives may nominate candidates from anywhere within their state. The regulation allocates four vacancies to nominees from the District of Columbia and one vacancy each to nominees from Puerto Rico, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, and American Samoa. The regulation states that nominating officials may select individuals for nomination by any method they wish, including a screening examination.

United States Coast Guard Academy

Procedures for appointments to USCGA are established by regulations issued by the Secretary of Homeland Security. Additional qualifications may be set by the superintendent of USCGA, who is responsible for appointments to the academy. No congressional nomination is required for admission to this service academy.

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