

Updated June 29, 2026

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 one of three primary commissioning sources for officers, along with the Senior Reserve Officer Training Corps and Officer Candidate School. The military service academies include the

- U.S. Military Academy (USMA), West Point, NY, under the Department of the Army;
- U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), Annapolis, MD, under the Department of the Navy (Navy and Marine Corps); and
- U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), Colorado Springs, CO, 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). Each of the military service academies has their own statutory authorities under Title 10 of the *U.S. Code*.

Academy Oversight and Leadership

The Department of Defense's Personnel and Readiness office and the respective military department Secretaries provide policy, oversight, and management for the service academies. (Department of Defense is "using a secondary Department of War designation," under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025.) Statute provides for a Board of Visitors (BoV) for each academy which serves as an independent advisory body on matters related to morale, discipline, social climate, curriculum, instruction, physical equipment, fiscal affairs, and academic methods. Membership on the BoV is determined by law and includes those designated by the Chairman and Ranking Members of the Armed Services Committees, House and Senate leadership, and six individuals designated by the President.

The academies are led by a superintendent—a military officer who is a general or admiral *detailed* (assigned) to the position by the President. By law, the superintendent serves for a minimum of three years in the position and "shall be retired" from service at the end of the appointment, although waivers are authorized in some cases. Academy faculty and staff include a mix of military and federal civilian personnel as well as contractors.

Admissions

Admission to the service academies is competitive. To be appointed to a service academy, an applicant must meet certain eligibility requirements and be nominated by Members of Congress or other authorized individuals (See CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: Resources for Outreach and Management*). Admissions offices generally assess candidates for admission in three areas: academics, physical aptitude, and leadership potential. A candidate must also meet medical standards for service. To matriculate, a nominated applicant must be a U.S. citizen, between 17 and 23 years old, unmarried, without a legal obligation to support any dependents, and not pregnant.

Foreign National Students

Limited numbers of foreign national students are admitted each year. Under 10 U.S.C. §347(a), a maximum of 60 foreign students 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 nations following graduation and may incur a service obligation with their countries' militaries.

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 a 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 servicemembers prepare academically to meet the entrance standards, Congress and DOD have also considered the prep schools as avenues to increase access to the academies for disadvantaged demographic groups.

Student Life

While enrolled at the academies, students have the rank of midshipman (Navy) or cadet (Air Force and Army) and are on active duty per 10 U.S.C. §101(d). They live in military barracks, wear uniforms, and participate daily in military training and professional development. 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).

Table 1. Service Academy and U.S. Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (Fall 2024)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multi	Other/Unk.
USMA	63%	9%	11%	12%	1%	4%
USNA	56%	7%	15%	10%	9%	2%
USAFA	63%	5%	11%	8%	9%	2%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), College Navigator, at <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>. Most recent NCES data available is from Fall 2024.

Notes: “Multi” includes two or more races; “Other/Unk.” includes U.S. nonresidents, *Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders*, and *American Indian or Alaska Natives* (accounting for 1% or less in each category). Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Academic Curriculum

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, successful graduates are awarded a Bachelor of Science degree due to the technical content of the core curricula.

Enrollment and Demographics

The student limit for each academy is 4,400; each of the academies admits between 1,100 and 1,350 students per year. Women first entered the academies in 1976, and accounted for about 27% of all enrolled cadets and midshipmen as of March 2026. **Table 1** shows demographics by race and ethnicity.

Service Requirement

Upon graduating, cadets and midshipmen are required to accept an appointment as a commissioned officer, if tendered, thereby incurring a military service obligation (MSO) in the active/reserve component of one of the five Service branches. 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, for example in 1989 (P.L. 101-189) when the requirement was raised from five to six years for the class of 1992. It was reduced again 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. The military services estimate that the annual cost of education (or the amount that would be required to be reimbursed) is between \$60,000-\$70,000.

Funding

Students at the academies receive fully-funded tuition, room and board, and some military pay and benefits. 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 institutions, the academies have experienced similar disciplinary issues and problematic behaviors as seen in civilian college campuses (e.g., sexual misconduct, hazing, binge drinking, and cheating incidents).

Members of Congress, as nominating authorities, have a significant role in the competitive admissions processes. Congressional oversight may include the services’ development and implementation of candidate admission and selection criteria. Other issues that past Congresses have raised have included nomination processes, faculty composition, length of military service obligation (particularly in conjunction with graduates seeking employment as professional athletes), and demographic diversity.

As the academies are both a primary commissioning source and a dedicated professional development program for the military departments, Congress may also consider whether the academies’ curricula and professional development programs adequately prepare cadets and midshipmen for the responsibilities and challenges of 21st century military service.

Other CRS Products

CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: 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)

DOD Guidance

DODI 1322.22, *Military Service Academies*

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