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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 Title 10, Chapter 103, of the *U.S. 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 Space Force commissions. 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 roughly one-third of officers annually (see **Table 1**). Other major commissioning sources include military service academies; Officer Candidate/Training Schools; and direct appointment.

Table 1. ROTC Officer Accessions by Service for Fiscal Year 2022

Service	Active Component	Selected Reserve	Total
Army	4,305	3,454	**7,759**
Navy	831	87	**918**
Marine Corps	51	33	**84**
Air Force	1,933	620	**2,553**
Space Force	175	NA	**175**
Total	**7,295**	**4,194**	**11,489**

Source: CRS analysis of data in Office of People Analytics, Population Representation in the Military Services: FY22, Appendix B, Table B-30 and Appendix C, Table C-26.

Notes: FY2022 is the most current publicly available data. Space Force does not have a reserve component.

ROTC History

During the Civil War, Congress passed the Land Grant Act of 1862 (P.L. 37-108; 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, Congress authorized Navy participation 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).

ROTC Campus 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 ROTC programs access to on-campus facilities and support. As a result, the military departments shuttered ROTC programs at several universities.

Several universities continued to exclude ROTC programs from campus through the 1990s and early 2000s for several reasons, including opposition towards military policies barring gay individuals from openly serving. One such policy, commonly 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). 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 reintroduce ROTC programs.

Establishing ROTC Units

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

- *Host Unit*: all activities 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, or

- *Consortium*: several schools partner to share resources (e.g., facilities and staff) and maximize efficiency.

According to the military departments' FY2027 budget documents, approximately 1,619 schools have an ROTC host, cross-town, or extension unit.

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 is to 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 or downgrading of any existing Army ROTC unit. This provision was included in subsequent annual appropriations bills through FY2020 (P.L. 116-93, §8033). In June 2025, the Army announced a "strategic rebalance and optimization" of its ROTC program to include the inactivation and reclassification of several units.

ROTC Funding

Congress appropriates money for the ROTC program through two accounts: Operation and Maintenance (O&M) and Military Personnel (MILPERS) (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. ROTC Funding (in thousands of dollars)

	FY2025 (actual)	FY2026 (enacted)	FY2027 (request)
O&M			
Army	563,108	487,830	503,896
Navy	174,492	164,348	193,797
Air Force	137,758	131,342	143,686
MILPERS			
Army	85,500	77,606	79,963
Navy	21,373	23,325	21,058
Air Force	36,341	46,150	33,880

Source: Military Budget Documents for Fiscal Year 2027.

O&M funds scholarships, travel, contractual support, and other equipment or supply needs. MILPERS funds cover cadet and midshipman pay and allowances, uniforms, and stipends. More information on ROTC entitlements can be found in the *Department of War Financial Management Regulation*, Volume 7A, Chapter 59. The Department of Defense is "using a secondary Department of War designation," under Executive Order 14347, September 5, 2025. ROTC military instructors receive pay and benefits based on rank and grade and are not typically included as a separate line item in military budgets.

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 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 this commitment, the military departments help to cover contracted enrollees' educational costs. If an enrollee breaks the commitment, he or she may have to reimburse the department for 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, scholarship awards are based on GPA, test scores, and certain medical and fitness standards.

Relevant Statute

Title 10, Chapter 103, of the *United States Code*.

Other Resources

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

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