Defense Primer: Senior Reserve Officer Training Corps

Background
The Senior Reserve Officer Training Corps (SROTC)—more commonly referred to as the Reserve Officer 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 Coast Guard, part of the Department of Homeland Security, does not have an ROTC program, but does offer a College Student Pre-Commissioning Initiative (CSPI) that awards scholarships to students at minority-serving institutions and placement in the Coast Guard Officer Candidate School. 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 ROTC program is the largest single source of commissioned officers, producing more than 6,000 officers annually (see Figure 1). Other major commissioning sources include service academies (the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Military Academy, and the U.S. Air Force Academy); Officer Candidate/Training Schools; and direct appointment.

Figure 1. Active Duty Officer Gains by Commissioning Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FY2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ROTC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCS/OTS/PLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: ROTC includes both scholarship and nonscholarship. OCS/OTS/PLC includes Officer Candidates School (OCS), Aviation OCS, Officer Training School (OTS), and Platoon Leaders Course (PLC).

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. These colleges taught military tactics along with other subjects. 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 ROTC participants’ educational expenses, including tuition, fees, and books. It capped the number of participants who could receive financial assistance at 16,500 (5,500 for each department). The military departments lifted restrictions on full 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 at several universities ROTC programs were downgraded to an extracurricular activity or denied access to on-campus facilities and support. As a result, the military shuttered the ROTC programs at some universities. For example, in 1969, the Navy chose not to renew its contract with Yale University following a faculty member vote to disallow academic credit for ROTC courses.

In the 1990s, additional controversies around the ROTC program arose due to the Department of Defense’s (DOD) admission and separation policy for 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, citing rules protecting LGBTQ individuals from discrimination.

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
ROTC programs began to re-appear.

Establishing ROTC Programs
Institutions that wish to establish an ROTC program can apply to a military department, asking permission to host an
ROTC detachment. To be eligible for consideration, an
educational institution must be accredited, per 10 U.S.C.
§2102, 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
institution 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. That
decision, DOD policy states, “will be based on the most
efficient allocation of limited resources to meet the specific
needs of the Military Department concerned.”

According to DOD policy, ROTC programs may be
affiliated with institutions 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 institutions come together to share
resources (e.g., facilities and staff), in order to maximize
efficiency.

The military departments have previously tried to close
some ROTC units—some of which commission as few as a
dozen officers per year. The proposed closures have been
controversial. In 2013, the Army planned to close 13 ROTC
detachments. The Army’s decision generated pushback,
particularly 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.

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 do not formally enroll in
the ROTC program do not incur a service obligation.

Students who choose to 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.

ROTC Funding and Enrollment
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 FY2021
were $812 million in O&M and $175 million in MILPERS.
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 (including monthly subsistence pay),
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.

---

**Relevant Statute**
Chapter 103 of Title 10, United States Code.

**Other Resources**
DOD Instruction 1215.08 Senior Reserve Officers’ Training
Corps (ROTC) Programs

Kristy N. Kamarck, Specialist in Military Manpower
Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.