

Diversity and the Success of Entering Classes at the U.S. Service Academies

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The United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) at Colorado Springs, and the United States Naval Academy (USNA) at Annapolis provide tuition-free, four-year undergraduate education and prepare entrants to be officers of the U.S. military services. Graduates are commissioned as officers for a minimum of five years. Each of the service academies admits between 1,100 and 1,350 entrants each year. In light of concerns regarding the diversity of cadets/midshipmen selected by the service academies, Congress requested that the Secretary of Defense conduct a comprehensive assessment of the recruiting efforts, admissions policies, graduation rates, and career success rates of academy entrants and graduates.

RAND was asked to assist the Office of the Secretary of Defense in analyzing the data provided by the service academies on the gender and race/ethnicity breakdown of entry cohorts, their first-year completion rates, their graduation rates, and their rates of completing their initial service obligation (ISO). These data covered the period from 1992 to 2009.

Women and Minorities Are an Increasing Percentage of Entering Classes

The percentage of women averaged 16 percent in USMA and 21 percent in USAFA and USNA in the three most recent entry cohorts (2007–2009), an increase of 4–6 percentage points over the three earliest entry cohorts (1992–1994) for which data were available. The percentage of nonwhites also increased over time in the three academies: from 16 to 23 percent in USMA and from 18 to 22 percent in USAFA and USNA. In USNA, the percentage of nonwhites in the 2009 entering class was at an all-time high. Of the 2007–2009 entering classes, across the three

Key findings:

- The percentage of women and nonwhites in entering cohorts has increased in all three service academies since 1992.
- Academy graduation rates for women and minorities have increased over time and were comparable to or higher than those in very selective four-year colleges.
- While the percentage of USMA graduates who completed their initial service obligation increased over time, the completion rate declined among both USAFA and USNA graduates.

academies, 5–6 percent were black or African-American, 8–12 percent were Hispanic or Latino (highest in USNA), 4–7 percent were Asian (highest in USAFA), and 1 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native.

First-Year Completion Rates Have Been Increasing

The percentage of entrants successfully completing the first year increased in all three service academies from the earliest classes to the most recent. Between 85 and 90 percent of those who entered the academies in the most recent cohorts made it through the first year, and there was little difference in completion rates by gender and race/ethnicity.

Graduation Rates of Women and Minorities Have Increased Over Time

Overall, USMA graduation rates remained relatively constant over time (76–77 percent); USAFA graduation rates increased from 72 to 76 percent; and USNA graduation rates increased from 78 to 85 percent. In particular, the gradu-

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ation rates of women, blacks, and Hispanics have increased over time. For example, women have increased their graduation rates to the point that they are on a par with men. In USNA, the increase over time was substantial (15 percentage points) between the earliest and most recent entry cohorts.

Almost all racial/ethnic groups either maintained or slightly increased their graduation rates over time in USMA. In USAFA, Asians and whites experienced larger increases in graduation rates than blacks and Hispanics. In USNA, Hispanics experienced larger increases (13 percentage points) than other groups, all of which posted gains of 7–8 percentage points.

ISO Completion Rates Have Exhibited Varying Trends

In USMA, graduates' ISO completion rate averaged 91 percent for the 2001–2003 graduating classes—higher than the completion rate of earlier cohorts. The rate at which women completed their ISO also rose sharply, and they were on a par with men in the most recent cohorts. All racial/ethnic groups posted increases in ISO completion, ranging from 8 percentage points for blacks to 12 percentage points for Asians.

Among USAFA graduates, the ISO completion rate declined from 90 percent for the earliest cohorts to 82 percent for the more recent cohorts. The rate declined markedly among women, blacks, and Asians.

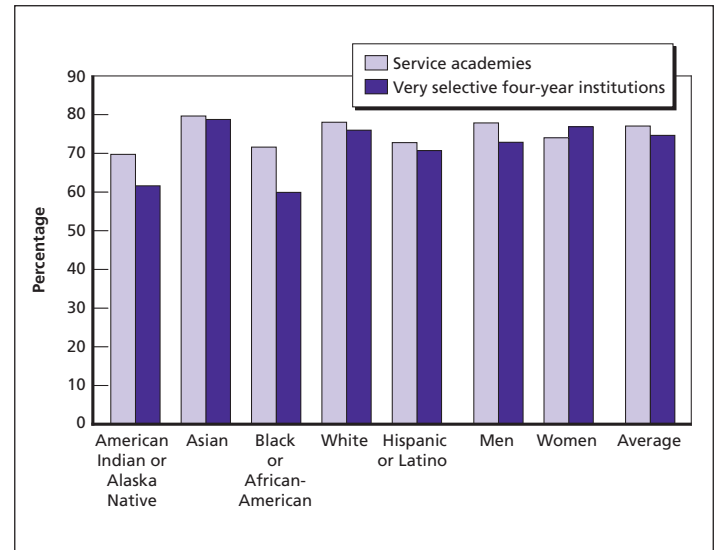
Among USNA graduates, the ISO completion rate declined from 95 percent for the earliest cohorts to 89 percent for the more recent cohorts. As with USAFA, the rate declined markedly for women. There were also large declines of 8–13 percentage points in ISO completion rates among all nonwhite groups.

Exogenous factors—such as reductions in force or competition from the civilian economy—are likely to affect retention and ISO completion, and this may help explain the decline. An analysis of the effects of such factors was beyond the scope of the study, however.

Academy Graduation Rates Are Somewhat Higher Than Those at Comparable Civilian Institutions

The analysis compared the 2003–2005 graduation rates of the service academies to those of “very selective” civil-

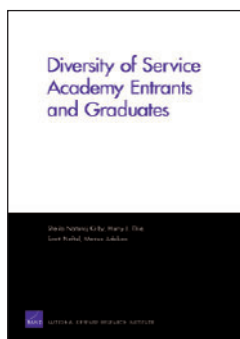
The Service Academies' Graduation Rates Compared Favorably with Those at Civilian Institutions for Most Groups



ian four-year institutions for the 1998 freshman class (see figure). Academy graduation rates were higher than those of comparable civilian four-year institutions, slightly so overall and to greater degrees among certain racial/ethnic groups. For example, 72 percent of blacks graduated from the service academies, on average, compared with 60 percent who attended four-year civilian institutions. While women had higher graduation rates than men in the civilian institutions, the opposite was true in the service academies. However, in the 2009 graduating class, there was little difference in the graduation rates of men and women.

Recommendations for DoD to Support Service Efforts to Improve Diversity

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) needs to take steps both to support service efforts to improve diversity and to ensure that the plans are linked to the larger DoD vision and goals, including clearly communicating DoD's definition of *diversity*; reviewing goals for diversity and ensuring that they are aligned with DoD's overall mission; and focusing efforts not simply on accessing a more diverse group of officers but also on increasing career retention of these officers. ■



This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute documented in *Diversity of Service Academy Entrants and Graduates*, by Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Harry J. Thie, Scott Naftel, and Marisa Adelson, MG-917-OSD (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG917>), 2010, 162 pp., \$41, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4893-6. This research brief was written by Sheila Nataraj Kirby. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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