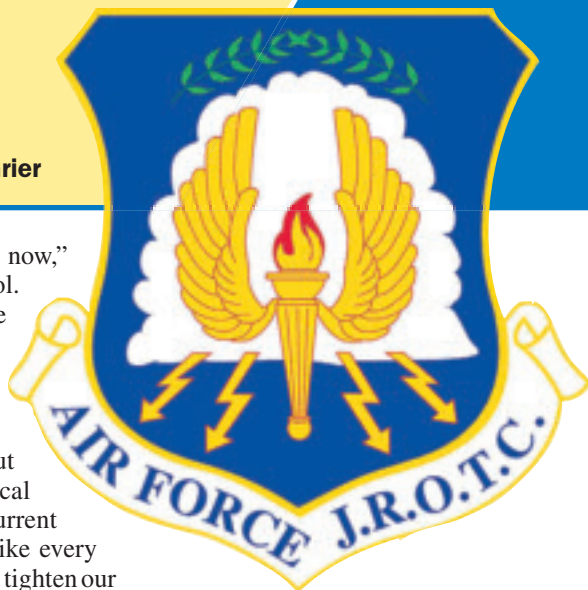


AFJROTC

in a Holding Pattern

In recent years, the Air Force-inspired high school citizenship program saw more students, instructors, and units than ever. But plans for growth are falling victim to shrinking budgets.

By Peter Grier



Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps is increasingly popular with its high school participants and congressional authorizers—but with this comes growing pains.

AFJROTC provides high school students with leadership training and science-oriented classroom instruction, plus the opportunity to engage in a wide variety of services to local communities. JROTC units carry the colors at football games. They march in local parades and raise money for schoolmates affected by illness. They host dances for veterans and compete against each other in athletic challenges.

All those activities have combined into a package that's proved increasingly attractive to teenagers in recent years. Enrollment in AFJROTC has risen steadily from some 101,000 cadets in the 2008 school year, and was projected to reach 121,000 in 2013.

But expansion is now on hold. Along with other programs in the Department of Defense, Air Force JROTC headquarters faces budget sequestration issues, which has sliced into its plans for the future.

"We are at a pause right now," said AFJROTC Director Col. Cameron L. Gilbert. "We are trying to grow," but even as the number of cadets increased, the program's funding declined. AFJROTC sustained a \$12.5 million cut in program funding from Fiscal 2011 to 2014, leaving its current budget at \$48.5 million. "Like every other organization we have to tighten our belts a little bit," said Gilbert.

Of course JROTC has experienced cutbacks before, particularly in the aftermath of major conflicts when the US military shrank and the civilian population wanted to focus on more overtly peacetime pursuits.

AFJROTC's goal is to develop young American citizens with a sense of responsibility and accomplishment. While some cadets do eventually join the ranks of the military, it is not intended as a recruitment tool, and students do not incur any obligation to the Air Force.

State Units

In the United States the idea of organized training for a young cadet corps

goes back more than 100 years. In 1911, Army Lieutenant Edgar Z. Steever was serving as an inspector-instructor for military units in Wyoming when he suggested a noncompulsory cadet corps composed of high school students. They would learn self-control and service to their community.

In 1916, with US involvement in World War I looming, Congress passed a National Defense Act authorizing both senior ROTC for college students and a junior version of the same program for high schools. The Army provided cadets with uniforms, equipment, and instructors. The senior ROTC units got Active Duty military members as lead-

ers, while junior ROTC units received a mix of some Active and some retired military personnel. At the time successful JROTC graduates could earn a commission in the reserves when they reached the age of 21.

In 1963 Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, in search of budget cuts, slashed JROTC funds and converted some units to a cheaper rival program, the National Defense Cadet Corps, funded largely by schools themselves. This was not well-received by many civic leaders, who saw JROTC as a means to fight delinquency and build local spirit. Congress moved to revive the program by passing the ROTC Revitalization Act of 1964, expanding senior and junior ROTC and authorizing all branches of the military to offer their own JROTC programs. The bill also provided financial incentives for high schools that hired military retirees as instructors, setting up a partnership structure that remains in place today.

The Air Force launched its JROTC effort in 1966 with 20 units. In 1972, the service opened JROTC to females; they now constitute 37 percent of the cadet corps. Today there are 847 units located in the continental US and 17 overseas. An authorized headquarters staff of 32 oversees these units and approximately 1,900 instructors.

A typical high school unit has one retired officer instructor, one retired noncommissioned officer instructor, and some 125 cadets. In terms of comparing the Air Force program to those of the other services, the distribution of JROTC units reflects the relative size of military branches. Thus the Army is entitled to 47 percent of all JROTC squads, since it is 47 percent of the entire US military's manpower. Today the Army has more than 1,700 programs. The Air Force is next in size, with 27 percent of authorized JROTC units. The Navy has an allocation of 20 percent, and the Marine Corps has six percent.

AFJROTC officials say they would like to increase the program's presence in states where it is underrepresented. In the 1960s, when the Air Force program was just taking off, many of the schools requesting units were located in southeastern states, generally more conservative and with more of a military tradition than states in the northern or West Coast regions. Officials at the time

Photo via La Quinta High School AFJROTC



AFJROTC cadets from La Quinta High School, La Quinta, Calif., participate in tug-of-war as part of a fitness challenge event.

approved many of these applications to get AFJROTC off to a good start.

Since then Congress has voted to urge the services to maintain a "fair and equitable distribution" of JROTC units among the states, similar to the way they are equitably distributed among the services themselves. Due to this, AFJROTC's ultimate goal is for each state's share of units to reflect that state's share of the total number of US high schools.

Some states are oversubscribed. Given its number of high schools, Georgia should have 21 AFJROTC units, for instance. It currently has 63. Texas should have 65, but has 102.

The problem for JROTC leadership is that demand for new units is strongest in such states. Right now there are some 220 schools on a waiting list to open new AFJROTC programs, but many are from Georgia, Texas, Florida, and South Carolina.

"It is very difficult for a new school in an overrepresented state to receive an offer to open an AFJROTC unit," stated AFJROTC's 2013 annual report.

The flip side of this coin is that requests from underrepresented states get a boost up the list. Among those high on the corps' wish list are California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Iowa. For example, California's "fair share" of units would be 106, but the state has only 60.

Life Skills and Leadership

"But right now our top order state would be Idaho. That would be the No. 1 unit we could open," said Gilbert of AFJROTC. Idaho earns this spot because it is one of only two states—the other is

Montana—having no AFJROTC presence at all.

The point of AFJROTC is not to provide recruiters a stream of youngsters prepared for military service, say its leaders. "It is a citizenship development program, from the Air Force perspective," said Gilbert. The steady increase in numbers shows that this approach has appeal, he said. "A lot of young men and women enrolled right now see the benefits of the program."

These cadets wear uniforms supplied by the Air Force. They take leadership education that includes lessons in uniform wear and drill, communications skills, and financial management. Aerospace science classes teach the history of aviation and the principles of flight and navigation, among other things.

Color guard is perhaps the extracurricular AFJROTC activity that draws the most attention. These units present the flag at athletic events and assemblies in many schools. But marksmanship, model rocketry, and outdoors events such as orienteering are big draws for cadets as well. For cadets interested in becoming pilots, AFJROTC, in some areas, partners with the Civil Air Patrol to offer a flight orientation program. Many JROTC classrooms have PC-based flight simulators.

Instructors do introduce cadets to military basics but they also discuss advantages and opportunities for many civilian careers. For example, many units participate in the Air Force Association's popular CyberPatriot cyber defense competition, where they learn valuable computer skills.

"Air Force JROTC is really teaching these young men and women life skills,



Photo by Susan White

Cadets Sydney White (l) and Kortny Brothers from the North Point High School, Waldorf, Md., AFJROTC unit. In addition to the 48 states with an AFJROTC presence, units are also based in Puerto Rico, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, the UK, Japan, South Korea, and Guam.

basic things they will need to survive and succeed as they move past high school," said Gilbert.

JROTC is particularly popular in rural and inner city areas where it can provide structure and examples of leadership that may otherwise be hard to come by. For those without mentors or many positive adult role models, the program can encourage students to do more than society expects, said program officials.

Ninety-one percent of principals whose schools have AFJROTC units strongly agreed that the program boosted graduation rates, according to a 2012 survey. Eighty-five percent agreed it led to better attendance. Seventy-six percent agreed that it led to lower suspension rates.

AFJROTC's diversity is one of its other strengths. African-Americans constitute 28 percent of cadets, as opposed to a 16 percent share of high school students overall; 11 percent of cadets are multi-racial, and 11 percent Hispanic. Forty-three percent are Caucasian. "We do a very good job of bringing in a diverse population," said Gilbert.

The program also portrays the Air Force in a positive light for kids who might not have any idea what the military is about. "It creates a popular picture of the Air Force. ... It may entice a kid who sees it," said Gilbert.

While AFJROTC may not be intended as a recruiting tool, it does at least spark some interest in national service. There is little doubt that a number of participants join the military because of their high school JROTC experience.

In 2012, about 13 percent of Air Force first-time enlistees had some experience

with JROTC, for example. About four percent had been in AFJROTC in particular. About 10 percent, or 104 cadets, of the Air Force Academy's 2012 freshman class had experience in AFJROTC units. Some 4.5 percent of officer graduates who earned a commission at the end of basic officer training reported having joined AFJROTC in high school.

Congressional Favor

Some of this results from incentives offered to JROTC youngsters. A student who completes two years of the program is entitled to the grade of E-2 following completion of basic military training. A three-year JROTC veteran can join up as an E-3 airman first class. In addition, each service academy sets aside 20 appointments for JROTC cadets.

AFJROTC instructors are retired members of the armed forces. They wear Air Force uniforms and teach an Air Force-designed curriculum. Even so, they are employees of the schools they teach in, not the US military. By law they make at least as much in pay and allowances as they would if they were still on Active Duty. To bring their compensation to this level, school districts and JROTC headquarters split the amount between their retired and Active pay 50-50. That is just the floor for pay, however. Some 85 percent of schools pay JROTC instructors more than the legal requirement.

Instructors are a huge budget item for JROTC. More than 91 percent of the amount of money the program re-

ceives for operations and maintenance goes to instructor salaries. Despite the financial incentives, finding enough qualified instructors was a problem in the past. AFJROTC officials said this is no longer the case, as they now have a 98 percent fill rate and more than 1,000 applicants on file.

"We don't hire for the schools," said Gilbert. "We present applicants to the schools and the schools hire them."

But money became a challenge for JROTC even before budget sequestration kicked in last year.

"Over the last three years the funding made available to us has significantly decreased," said AFJROTC Deputy Director Greg Winn. "But even as that funding has decreased, cadet enrollment and what instructors have been able to do has increased, which is a testament to the quality of instruction."

This is why no new units are in the works at the moment. There are not enough resources to set them up. In fact, the number of units has regressed from a high of 884 in 2010.

Some schools, hard-pressed themselves, have canceled their AFJROTC units to save money. In the short term, program leaders are aiming to maintain stability at the level of some 870 units, per a directive from the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

"As we proceed we already have the congressional favor. It's a matter of matching that with the funding so the program can move forward and we can reach out to more kids and have a positive impact," said Gilbert. ■

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