

West Point, ROTC struggle to recruit African-Americans

Academic, medical trends limiting those eligible

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Officials here at the U.S. Military Academy said just 616 black youths had the qualifications to attend the academy this year, which mirrors a national trend of decreasing academic achievement by that minority group.

They don't mean 616 blacks who applied to West Point qualified; they mean of all black high school seniors who graduated last spring nationwide, only 616 met West Point's entrance requirements, according to Col. Michael Jones, director of admissions.

"It's worse than even five years ago," Jones said — the point, according to Jones, when the academy and the Army began to see an increase in students with low SAT scores or without high school diplomas, as well as an increase in overweight candidates and those with medical problems such as di-

abetes and asthma.

"This is a societal problem that we have to get a handle on," he said.

A Cadet Command official said the Army's Reserve Officers' Training Corps faces a similar problem.

"It's not a situation where African Americans are underrepresented in ROTC," said Paul Katakis, cadet command spokesman. "They're underrepresented at college campuses in general."

Nationally, white students score an average of 1,068 points on the SAT and black students an average of 864, according to the College Board, which administers the test. West Point requires a score of 1,200 points to gain admittance.

"SAT scores for black males are going down," Jones said. "Females do OK."

Based solely on SAT scores, Jones said, only 2,784 black stu-

dents qualified for West Point nationwide.

When making admissions decisions, Jones said he also looks at the classes students chose in high school. Black high school students are less likely to take high-level math classes, such as calculus, or Advanced Placement classes geared toward preparing students for college, College Board statistics show.

But the problem isn't purely academic: Of black high school students, 26 percent do not qualify medically, in part because of a rise in health problems such as diabetes and asthma within that minority population, according to Jones and Army recruiting command statistics.

Another 21 percent don't make it because they're overweight — a percentage that continues to go up.

Army recruiting officials say the numbers of youths not able to join

the military because they are overweight or dropped out of high school are going up across the board, but are especially high among black and Hispanic youths.

In an Army where black soldiers make up 23 percent of the enlisted ranks, but only 12 percent of the commissioned officers' corps — compared with 75 percent white officers and 58 percent white enlisted — officials see a need for change.

"We need Army leadership that looks like the population," Jones said. "We need mentors for our soldiers."

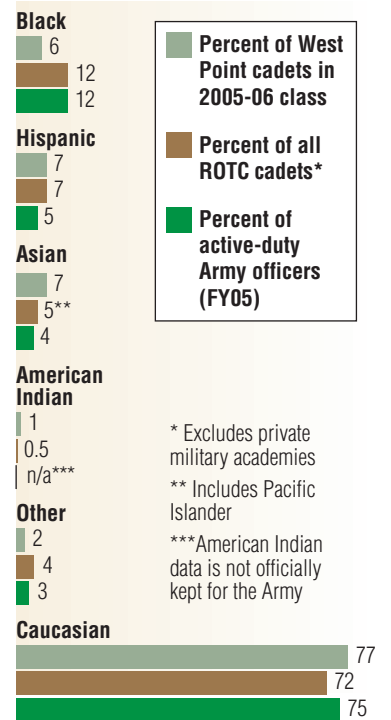
There have been black cadets in every class at West Point since 1948, and they were in ROTC programs long before that. But the percentage of black male officers in 2005 stood at 10 percent of all male officers, only 0.3 percent more than in 1998. The number of blacks in ROTC in 2005 was down by 18 percent from 2004, and 34 percent lower than in 2002.

"It's not that our school doesn't want them," said Marjana Mair, a black senior at West Point. "It's that the education system is failing them."

According to a study by Johns Hopkins University's Center for

MINORITY REPRESENTATION

How the percentage of minorities in the ranks of West Point and ROTC cadets compares to active-duty officers:



Source: U.S. Military Academy, Reserve Officer Training Corps, Army
JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

See MINORITY Page 22

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