

Army expands ‘prep course’ for low-scoring applicants after pilot

By Davis Winkie 10 January 2023



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The U.S. Army will start a Future Soldier Preparatory Course pilot program at Fort Jackson, S.C. to help America’s youth overcome academic and physical fitness barriers to service so they can earn the opportunity to join the Army. (Nathan Clinebelle)

The Army is doubling down on an ambitious accessions experiment that’s allowing hopeful soldiers with poor fitness or low aptitude test scores to attend a pre-basic training course to get them up to service entry standards, officials announced Monday.

The service first launched its Future Soldier Preparatory Course in August 2022 amid a dismal recruiting year, which saw the Army land [around 20,000 soldiers short](#) of its authorized end strength. The course is aimed to reduce the recruiting shortfall by offering applicants 90 days to reduce their body fat or improve their scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Those who succeed renegotiate their contracts and proceed to basic training, and those who don’t are discharged.

The course will add two additional academic track training companies at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and establish a company-sized version of the academic track at Fort Benning, Georgia. The fitness improvement

training track, according to [Army release](#).

Army Times [first reported the service's plan](#) to establish the course, and an Army Times reporter [embedded at the course](#) for two days in August. Officials there said the course was about investing time, money and care in young Americans who want to serve but need help meeting entry standards.

The expansion comes after a successful pilot period, officials added. By the end of December, 2,965 of the course's 3,206 attendees — or nearly 93% — had successfully met entry standards and proceeded to basic training.

“The initial results of the Future Soldier Preparatory Course have been very encouraging and demonstrate the Army's unparalleled ability to unlock a person's true potential,” said Gen. Gary Brito, the top general for Training and Doctrine Command. “These programs are providing recruits an opportunity to serve and are preparing them not just for the rigors of basic training, but for a life through Army service.”



Students in the Future Soldier Prep Course attend a class with Army-issued tablets loaded with course materials in August 2022 at Fort Jackson, S.C. (Davis Winkie/Staff)

At Fort Jackson, the two new companies will accept more recruits who scored between 21 and 30 on the qualification test, which is administered as part of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or ASVAB. The test scores range from 1 to 99, with an applicant's score representing their performance percentile relative to a historically-normed applicant pool. But scores have dropped significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic began, military officials have said.

Applicants with such low scores are rated as being in Category IV of a tiered aptitude assessment system and are traditionally only allowed to make up a small portion of a given year's recruitment haul. There are also restrictions, though less stringent, on those with scores between 31 and 49, known as Category IIIB.

Among those who attended the Fort Jackson academic pilot, which follows a curriculum used for test preparation classes traditionally available to those already in uniform, 95% of trainees previously rated in Category IV successfully increased their scores to Category IIIB or better within two test attempts. Army officials said the average increase was 17 points.

The new company at Fort Benning, though, will accept only Category IIIB-scoring trainees on a voluntary basis, as opposed to the Category IV trainees attending the academic track at Jackson. Those at Fort Benning will have 30 days of classroom instruction and one opportunity to increase their test scores. Those who succeed can renegotiate their contracts; those who don't will proceed to basic training for the job in which they originally enlisted.

Those who successfully improve their scores in the Fort Benning course will no longer count against the service's limit on Category IIIB recruits and be able to fill higher-skilled positions that may be short on numbers amid the ongoing end-strength crisis.

The move is about securing quality soldiers in spite of the difficult recruiting environment, Brito said.

"The Army will not sacrifice quality for quantity," he said. "We are confident given the right instruction and support, these recruits will be able to perform successfully and meet or exceed the standards expected of every Soldier."