

Investing in Our Youth: Army Develops Future Soldier Preparatory Course

By Gary Loten-Beckford 16 July 2022



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)

In response to the most challenging recruiting environment since the start of the all-volunteer force in 1973, the Army is implementing an innovative new program to prepare recruits who are en-route to initial military training to meet or exceed our rigorous standards.

The Future Soldier Preparatory Course pilot program, which is set to start in early August at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, is an investment in America's youth to help them overcome academic and physical fitness barriers to service so they can earn the opportunity to join the Army.

The U.S. Army has already identified approximately 2,000 applicants who may be eligible to participate in the course. The Army will initially run the Future Soldier Preparatory Course as a pilot program and will review results in the early part of fiscal year 23 to determine if the course was effective and should become permanent.

"The Future Soldier Prep Course allows recruits, who meet all other qualifications for enlistment, a path to serve," said Gen. Paul E. Funk II, Commanding General, Training and Doctrine Command.

“The young men and women who will participate in this pilot have the desire to improve themselves and want to honorably serve their country. This course is a great way to increase opportunities for them to serve without sacrificing the quality needed across our force.”

The percentage of young Americans meeting Army enlistment standards has decreased markedly over the past four decades. Currently only 23% of young Americans fully meet the Army’s eligibility requirements, down from 29% in recent years. The effects of the COVID pandemic over the past two years have exacerbated barriers to enlistment for many young Americans.

The pilot program will provide focused academic and fitness instruction to help recruits meet the Army’s desired accession standards for body fat composition and academic test performance prior to basic training. Access to this program will allow these individuals who already meet all other qualifications for enlistment, to include moral and medical accessions standards, a path to serve.

Recruits admitted through this program will all be required to ultimately meet Department of Defense enlistment standards to ensure we maintain the overall quality of the force.

“This course is one of many approaches the Army is taking to invest in America’s young people,” stated Funk. “We have to acknowledge that society has changed and help our youth improve so they can benefit from the training and opportunities that Army service provides. The Army is still the best place for young people to achieve their potential.”



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Future Soldier Preparatory Course

The pilot course includes two separate tracks: a fitness program and an educational program for recruits who need help improving their scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Recruits with an ASVAB score of 21-30 may only participate in the academic track. Recruits with an ASVAB score between 42-49 may be allowed to voluntarily participate in both tracks, the fitness portion prior to basic combat training and the academic portion following basic training.

Individuals in both tracks are projected to remain in the FSPC for a maximum of 90 days, with opportunities every three weeks to leave the program and ship to basic training if they meet or exceed the Army's desired accession standards.

As part of their pre-enlistment process, all trainees will still have to take the gender-neutral Occupational Physical Assessment Test (OPAT), administered by a recruiter, to qualify for the physical demand level required for an Army MOS prior to their participation in the preparatory course.

"This course gives us an opportunity to unleash unrealized potential by surrounding trainees with experts that they likely would not have access to at home," said Brig. Gen. Patrick Michaelis, the U.S. Army Training Center and Fort Jackson Commanding General. "With the right instruction and professional support, we are confident they will be able to perform successfully and meet the standards expected of every Soldier."

The academic portion will include a course modeled after the Basic Skills Education Program (BSEP) the Army has been using since 1977. The program aims to improve word knowledge, reading comprehension, arithmetic reasoning, and test-taking skills using a format proven successful over the past 40 years.

BSEP is a refresher course covering both math and English that soldiers take to help raise their scores when re-testing on the Armed Forces Classification Test (AFCT). BSEP is a teacher-facilitated program with computer lessons for learning enhancement.

Instructors will conduct on-going evaluations of delayed trainee academic improvement to ensure standards are maintained. Fort Jackson will use a combination of BSEP instructors and newly commissioned lieutenants as assistant instructors, to establish a positive learning environment for delayed trainees.

Recruits with an ASVAB score of 21-30 may only participate in the academic track. Recruits with an ASVAB score between 42-49 may be allowed to voluntarily participate in both tracks, the fitness portion prior to basic combat training and the academic portion following basic training. Individuals who improve their score above a 50 move into the desired higher standard test score categories and are potentially eligible for additional MOS opportunities or enlistment incentives.

Data from existing Army educational programs, including Basic Skills and Education Program (BSEP) and the Foreign Language Recruiting Initiative (FLRI) suggest participants can improve their test scores up to 10 points following 90 days of focused instruction and professional support. Using

that data, we determined that individuals who score between a 31-41 would not be able to improve their scores enough to move into the next higher test score category (TSC IIIA) and would not have the potential to qualify for additional MOSs or additional incentives.

The fitness course is an expansion of the current Assessment of Recruit Motivation and Strength (ARMS) 2.0 program. Under the current ARMS 2.0 program, the Army has already enlisted more than 1,200 recruits who were up to 2% above the accession body fat standards, based on gender, age and height/weight. These recruits shipped straight to basic training, were closely tracked throughout their enlistment, and ultimately subject to existing Army physical fitness standards. To date, less than 1% of recruits who were already accessed under ARMS 2.0 have been separated from the Army for body fat composition.

With the expansion of ARMS 2.0, recruits who exceed the accession body fat composition standard by greater than 2% but no more than 6% will attend the fitness track of the Future Soldier Preparatory Course. They will be educated on the five Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) domains (physical, mental, nutrition, sleep, and spiritual) supported by H2F professionals, to include dietitians, physical therapists, occupational therapists, strength and conditioning coaches, athletic trainers, and behavioral health specialists. The program is designed to improve their overall health, physically and mentally prepare them for basic training, and ultimately improve their health in the long term so they can successfully serve their country.

Trainees in the fitness program will ship to basic training once their body fat composition percentage is no more than 2% above the accessions standard, based on gender, age and height/weight. All trainees will have already qualified for their MOS by taking the gender-neutral Occupational Physical Assessment Test (OPAT) before arriving at the Future Soldier Preparatory Course.

To ensure individuals have enough time to safely manage their body fat, they will have one year from accessing onto active duty to meet the Army's post-accession body composition standards. Recruits accessing into the Army National Guard or Reserve must meet post-accession body fat composition standards no later than one year after starting Initial Active Duty for Training.

Trainees will remain in the FSPC for no more than 90 days. Trainees in the fitness track who do not meet the body composition standard of 2% or less above accession standard after 90 days will be processed for separation.

Trainees in the academic track who do not meet the Army's desired higher standard of a 31 or higher on the ASVAB after 90 days will be evaluated using the whole person concept and may be retained and shipped to basic combat training as they met initial standards within the 4% TSC IV cap.

The whole person concept is already in use at basic training, and includes an assessment of their self-discipline, inculcation of the Army Values, and character. The whole person assessment begins once the individual starts the enlistment process and continues throughout the trainee's time in the FSPC, through basic and advanced training and on to the first unit of assignment. All trainees, as is

standard throughout the Army, are counseled regularly on their performance, expectations for success and ability to meet Army standards.

All individuals in both tracks must meet all other training standards and the whole person assessment standards to graduate from basic combat training and advanced individual training.

Trainees in both the fitness and academic tracks who are recommended for separation may be separated under the authority of Chapter 11, Entry Level Performance and Conduct for unsatisfactory performance while in an entry-level status. Chapter 11 allows for expeditious separation and facilitates future reentry into the service without prejudice. The authority to use Chapter 11 to separate FSPC participants does not limit the authority to separate participants under other provisions of law or regulation that are more appropriate in a specific case. FSPC participants will be treated in the same manner as Soldiers in all other stages of Initial Entry Training. Those separated under Chapter 11 are authorized to re-apply for an Army enlistment six months after the separation. This separation facilitates future reentry into the service without prejudice.

The Army will carefully monitor and assess these pilot programs to determine their success and ensure we are successfully preparing and building quality delayed trainees who have the desire and ability to meet our standards and serve honorably in our all-volunteer force.



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Eligibility

These programs are open for individuals looking to enlist in the active-duty Army, Army Reserves, and National Guard.

Recruits enlisting into the Army through these programs will be offered the same bonuses and incentives as all other recruits, with those in the academic track potentially renegotiating their contract pending improved test scores.

Individuals looking to enlist under the academic track of the Future Soldier Preparatory Course must possess a high school diploma or equivalent, achieve a test score of 21-30 on the AFQT, pass the MEPS physical, and not require a waiver for major misconduct.

Recruits who score between 42-49 on the AFQT may also volunteer for the academic track of the FSPC to improve their test score and potentially re-negotiate their enlistment contract, which may include additional incentives or additional MOS opportunities.

Recruits looking to enlist under the fitness portion must qualify for the ARMS 2.0 program, which requires a high school diploma or equivalent, a test score of 50 or higher on the AFQT, and pass the MEPS physical, with the exception of being no more than 6% above the accession body fat composition standards based on gender, age, and height/weight.

For more information on bonuses and incentives available check out www.GoArmy.com.

The Army has done this before

The Army has a long track record of successfully responding to societal trends to posture new Soldiers for success.

Existing educational programs have demonstrated individuals are able to improve their ASVAB scores when given the right instruction and professional support. The Army has been using BSEP since 1977 to help existing Soldiers significantly improve their AFQT scores and recruits in the Foreign Language Recruiting Initiative program have been receiving this training for years with tremendous success.

From 2004 to 2007, the original ARMS program was used to identify enlistees who, despite exceeding accession body fat composition standards, were fit to become productive members of the Army enlisted force. A 2011 RAND study showed Soldiers who enlisted under the original ARMS program were able to successfully complete their terms of service at the same rate as those who accessed meeting the height and weight standards.

Using lessons learned from these programs, we are investing in improving the holistic development of our Soldiers as part of the Army's People Strategy. The Army People Strategy and the program

reforms supporting it will provide new opportunities for young men and women to serve without sacrificing the quality of our force.

Trainees must meet all existing Army accession standards to graduate the FSPC. Upon entry into IET all soldiers are required to meet BCT and AIT completion standards prior to graduation and ultimate movement to first unit of assignment.

“Fort Jackson transitions civilians to Soldiers every day,” said Michaelis. “This course allows us to maintain our overall accessions standards while, at the same time, providing an opportunity for those who want to serve. In line with the recently published 'Call to Service' memorandum, we will not sacrifice quality for quantity, we will not lower standards, and we will invest in America's young people so they can meet our standards.