

Most diverse 'plebes' arrive at US Naval Academy

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. – Wave goodbye. Get in line. "Hurry up and wait" for your uniform, your medical exam and a crash course in saluting.

Everything about Wednesday's Induction Day at the U.S. Naval Academy was typical — except that the incoming class was the most racially diverse ever. Of the 1,230 incoming students, 435 are minority midshipmen — or 35 percent, up from 28 percent last year.

This year's "plebes" — freshmen — are helping close the gap between enlisted sailors and officers. About 21 percent of officers are minorities, while about 48 percent of enlisted men and women are.

Academy officials have expanded recruiting for future officers into places they have had trouble attracting students, such as urban areas with larger minority populations, with the goal of balancing the disparity. And officials hope future recruits will be enticed to stay in the Navy program when they can see more of their superiors are like them.

"There is definitely some direct associations with who is commanding you," said retired Capt. Bernard Jackson, president of the National Naval Officers Association, which helps minority officers develop their careers. "To be able to see (yourself) in the organization, it plays a strong part to have younger individuals stay."

The landmark class coincides with the 60th anniversary of the graduation of the first African-American midshipman, Wesley Brown, in 1949.

More important than recruitment is retention — surviving four grueling years of physical activity, leadership training and tough academics.

In 2009, the Hispanic graduation rate was 86 percent; the African-American graduation rate was 77 percent. Of 1,065 graduates in 2009, 826 were white graduates and 229 were minorities, up slightly from 223 in 2008.

Graduates go on to serve in varying capacities, including naval aviation, special warfare and medical corps.

Trainer Jason Hill, an ensign who graduated in May, said plebes would spend their six-week summer course becoming indistinguishable from their classmates.

That uniformity means if needed, plebes got haircuts. Designer eyewear and contacts are surrendered for unflattering spectacles. Each new midshipman dressed in the same uniform. In unison, each learned how to stare into the pages of their copy of "Reef Points," a manual they must memorize during "plebe summer."

Some gained experience in properly addressing upperclassmen, nervously shouting: "Sir, yes, sir!" or "Ma'am, yes, ma'am!"

And the preparation means a little bit of tough love from recent graduates. Training the incoming class is an adjustment, Hill said.

"It's a little weird for us to go from speaking normally to everyone to being a jerk," said Hill, who will report in August for flight training.

Edward Girling, 18, of Lynchburg, Va., said he came in thinking his summer was going to be rough. Girling arrived with the sides of his heads shaved bald, and the top intact.

"My cousins thought it would be funny to cut my head last night," he said.

He lamented he would miss sleeping, though Hill quickly corrected him.

"You'll get plenty of sleep during your six-week training," Hill said. "When you begin your school work, you'll get less sleep."

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On the Net:

U.S. Naval Academy: <http://www.usna.edu>

National Naval Officers Association: <http://www.nnoa.org>