

John S. McCain Strategic Defense Fellowship Program

Frequently Asked Questions



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General Program Questions

1. What grade level are Fellows appointed into at the start of their one-year Fellowship?

The National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2024 allows participants to be appointed at grade levels between the GS-10 and GS-12 (inclusive of DC Metro Locality Pay). Advertised grade levels will be based on needs identified by the Sponsoring Components. Eligibility for the GS-11 and GS-12 positions will be based on an applicant's resume demonstrating one year of specialized work experience (12 months or 52 weeks) at the preceding grade level. Additionally, Fellows are eligible to receive federal employee benefits during their one-year fellowship.

2. Who are the sponsoring organizations?

The sponsoring organizations that may host a Fellow are the Department of Defense components.

3. What job series is the Department of Defense seeking to fill with Cohort 6 applicants?

Traditionally, the Department of Defense have accepted applicants for the following series:

- Foreign Affairs (0130)
- Human Resources (0201)
- Management Analysis (0343)
- Miscellaneous Admin & Program Analysis (0301)
- Financial Management Analysis (0501)
- Operations Research Analysis (1515)
- Information Technology (2210)

4. Does the McCain Fellowship Program offer the Student Loan Repayment Incentive?

The Student Loan Repayment Incentives may be offered based on program funding availability and fellow eligibility. The Student Loan Repayment Incentive may only be offered to Fellows during their Fellowship year, who have federal education loans for their advanced degrees. The incentive cannot be used to cover loans for undergraduate degrees. Fellows who accept the Student Loan Repayment Incentive will be required to sign a 1-year continued service agreement which covers the duration of the full fellowship year. Removal from the program or voluntary departure during the Fellowship year will result in the Fellow having to reimburse the Department for the incurred cost of the Student Loan Repayment Incentive.

5. Are student loan incentives taxable?

Yes. In accordance with Federal tax regulations, the student loan incentive is considered taxable income.

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6. Does the McCain Fellowship Program offer training opportunities?

Yes. Fellows may take advantage of training opportunities provided by the Department or as recommended by their hosting organization. The McCain Fellowship Program subsidizes up to \$5,000 in training costs per Fellow during the Fellowship year.

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Applicant Eligibility Questions

1. What are the requirements to be considered for this Fellowship Program?

Participation in this Program is open to citizens of the United States or lawful permanent residents of the United States that possess a graduate degree from an accredited institution of higher education in the United States that was awarded not more than 2 years before the date of acceptance into the Fellows Program or will be awarded a graduate degree from an accredited institution of higher education in the United States not more than 6 months after the date of acceptance into the Fellows Program.

2. What is an advanced degree?

An advanced degree is defined as a professional or graduate degree (e.g., Master's, Ph.D., J.D.) earned from an accredited higher education institution.

3. What is the date of acceptance into the program?

The date of acceptance into the program is defined as the date in which an individual enters on duty into their position as a Fellow.

4. How does the date of my degree impact my ability to be considered for Cohort 6?

The Department of Defense is projecting that Cohort 6 participants will enter on duty on or before Monday, March 9, 2026. Applicants who obtain their advanced degree with a conferred date between March 2024 and September 2026 are likely eligible for appointment into the Program, considering this specific target date. However, an individual's entry on duty date is contingent upon their ability to meet all pre-employment requirements, including obtaining a clearance as deemed necessary by their Sponsoring Component. As such, Cohort 6 applicants with advanced degrees received in May 2024 should be mindful when applying that if selected and there is a delay in meeting all pre-employment requirements, they may ultimately be deemed ineligible to participate in the Program.

5. I received an advanced degree from an academic institution of higher education located outside of the United States. Am I eligible to be selected for participation in the John S. McCain Strategic Defense Fellowship Program?

Individuals that have received or are projected to receive graduate degrees from academic institution of higher education located outside of the United States are ineligible for consideration for this Program.

6. I previously applied to the program and did not get selected. Can I apply again for the next cohort?

Eligible applicants can re-apply for the next cohort. Applicants must re-submit their complete application packages prior to the deadline. Applicants can submit previous recommendation letters as long as the issued dates are within one year.

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7. **I am a U.S. Citizen or lawful U.S. permanent resident. Do I need to provide proof of citizenship or permanent residence?**

Yes. Applicants must be U.S. Citizens or lawful U.S. permanent residents and must provide proof of citizenship during the onboarding process and security investigation, if selected.

8. **The application requirements include “Passing background and security investigations,” so do I need to have a security clearance when I apply?**

No. A security clearance at the time of application is not required. If selected, Fellows will undergo a security clearance process and must successfully obtain a security clearance to become a McCain Fellow.

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Supporting Documents Questions

1. What resume format should be used?

In accordance with the Office of Personnel Management's 2025 Merit Hiring Plan established under Executive Order 14170, applicants' resume must be limited to two-pages. Resumes that exceed the two-page limit will result in immediate ineligibility, and no further consideration will be given.

All applicants are required to submit a resume limited to two pages showing all relevant experience. Your resume should contain the following, at a minimum: applicant name, address, contact information and e-mail address, educational institution, qualifying degree programs, and work experience. To ensure your qualifications can be properly evaluated, your resume must include the following information for each work experience:

- Employer name and job title
- Series, Grade Level, and Clearance Level (if position was Federal)
- Annual salary
- Position status (full-time or part-time position)
- The number of hours worked per week
- Start and end dates (month/year)
- Detailed description of the job duties, skills and accomplishments

Applicants should also include any certifications and licensures to support their qualifications. Additional information about federal resumes can be found on [USAJobs](#).

2. The application package requires two letters of recommendation and an endorsement letter. What is the difference between a letter of recommendation and an endorsement letter?

A letter of recommendation addresses the applicant's character, academic ability, and any extracurricular activities. A letter of recommendation may be from your current or previous professors, dean, academic advisor, coach, etc.

An endorsement letter endorses you for the position you are applying to and must come from the applicant's graduate institution of higher learning. The endorser should include how long they have known you, in what capacity, and the qualities that may make you a suitable candidate for the position. They may include your accomplishments or abilities they've observed from you in the aforementioned capacity.

3. Is there a page limit or character limit for the academic writing sample?

No, there are no page limits or character limit for the academic writing sample. Applicants may submit a writing sample of any length.

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- 4. The application package requests a personal statement explaining career areas of interest and motivations for service in the Department. Is there a page limit or character limit for this essay?**

No, there is no page limit or character limit for the essay of interest and motivation in working for the Department of Defense.

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Educational Requirements/Transcripts Questions

1. Do I need to submit both my undergraduate and graduate official transcripts?

Yes, you will need to submit both your unofficial undergraduate and graduate transcripts to identify your degrees and issuing academic institutions.

2. Can I include the unofficial transcript in my application package instead of the official transcript?

Yes, the McCain Fellowship Program can accept unofficial transcripts for the purpose of the application package. If selected, applicants must arrange to have their official conferred transcript sent to the Program Office during the onboarding phase.

3. I am currently pursuing my advanced degree and have not yet graduated. I anticipate graduating within six months of starting as a McCain Fellow. My conferred transcript will not be available until a future date. How do I apply?

Applicants who will graduate in the future may submit their unofficial transcript in the application package. If selected, applicants will need to have their official transcript sent to the Program Office and if it is non-conferred, a letter of enrollment from their registrar office will be required. Fellows who will receive their conferred degree after entering the Program must submit their conferred graduate transcripts to the Program Office once the degree has been conferred and is available. Failure to provide a conferred graduate transcript within six months from a Fellow's first day in the Program will result in removal.

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Application Process Questions

- 1. How can I find out about the next McCain Fellows application cycle?**

Application period and announcements will be posted on the McCain Fellows public website. Applicants may also find the McCain Application Announcement and apply on USA Jobs during the application period.
- 2. Can applicants or finalists request an extension or a deferral for their application?**

The McCain Fellowship Program does not allow for extensions or deferrals. All applications must be completed and submitted by the application deadline to be considered.
- 3. I applied for the upcoming McCain Cohort. When do I find out if I have been selected?**

Applications will be reviewed after the application period is closed. Applicants who are ineligible will receive a notification via USA Jobs. The McCain Fellowship Program Office will review the remaining applicants to determine if they are qualified for the Fellowship positions and referral to participating DoD organizations. This process may take up to 30 to 45 days and applicants will be notified when they are referred for selection.
- 4. I was interviewed by a participating DoD organization. What is the next step?**

Participating DoD organizations will make their selections after the interview phase and will notify the McCain Program Office of their selections. The McCain Program Office will extend Tentative Job Offer (TJO) to selected applicants. Applicants who were not selected after the interview phase will be notified of their status.
- 5. I accepted a Tentative Job Offer and the Security Clearance process was initiated. How long does the security clearance process take?**

There is no established timeline for the security clearance process. The security clearance process timeline varies per individual case, depending on the background of each individual and the level of security clearance being processed.

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6. Is drug testing required for those selected to participate in the McCain Fellowship Program?

Yes. All Fellows are placed in Testing Designated Positions, which requires pre-employment and random drug testing upon appointment.

For any additional questions, please contact whs.mccainfellows@mail.mil or visit our website at <https://www.whs.mil/McCain-Fellows-Program/>