
John S. McCain Strategic Defense Fellowship Program Frequently Asked Questions

General Program Questions

Q 1. What is the GS level, compensation, and benefits for McCain Fellows?

McCain Fellows are compensated at a GS-10 level (Washington, DC Metro Locality Pay) and are eligible to receive federal employee benefits during their one-year fellowship.

Q 2. If selected as a McCain Fellow, will I need to conduct rotations within my organization?

Rotations during the fellowship year are optional and not required. During the one-year fellowship, McCain Fellows may conduct two rotations in various offices within the same sponsoring organization. Fellows may be placed in rotations that supports the overall mission of the organization. Rotation locations vary as it largely depends on organization needs and mission. Rotation locations can be anywhere in the Washington metro DMV area, but it can also expand to areas where the sponsoring orgs need the Fellows to serve.

Q 3. Upon selection, can I request where I'm going to be assigned or rotation preference?

The PMO will determine the initial assignment. As a Fellow, you can share your rotation preference (function, specialty or location), with your host organization but there is no guarantee as the main goal of the PMO is to place Fellows in teams and location that ultimately provides value to the organization and DoD mission.

Q 4. Who are the sponsoring organizations?

There are nine sponsoring organizations under the McCain Fellows Program. They are the Office of the Under Secretaries of Defense (OUSDs) and Secretaries of a Military Department

- 6 OUSDs: Policy, Intel, Acquisition and Sustainment (A&S), Research and Engineering (R&E), Personnel and Readiness (P&R) and Comptroller
- 3 Secretaries of a Military Department: Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, Department of the Air Force and U.S. Space Force

Q 5. I'm a reservist/active military. Can I still apply to participate in the program and be eligible for military leave during the Fellowship?

You can apply to and participate in the program as a reservist/active military; however, Per OPM guidance, government employees under temporary billets not to exceed (NTE) 1 year must use annual leave or Leave without Pay (LWOP) for military orders. McCain Fellows are temporary billets NTE 1 year and fall under this category.

Q 6. Are applicants who are selected as Fellows guaranteed a Federal job?

The McCain Fellowship Program is a one-year leadership program. Fellows selected by a sponsoring organization will serve a 52-week appointment but are not guaranteed a permanent appointment at the end of their fellowship. Conversion to a permanent government employment is dependent on fellow's performance and conduct, DoD organization fit, billet availability, funding and sponsoring organization's ability to offer a permanent appointment.

Q 7. What career fields are you accepting applications for?

We're accepting applicants from various career fields: Foreign Affairs, Policy, Intel, Financial Management, Accounting, Finance, Program Management, Business Management, Acquisition, Contracting, Logistics and STEM fields: Science and Technology, Research and Engineering, Information Technology, Cyber, Data Scientists and Data Analytics.

Q 8. Does the program accept individuals with disabilities?

Yes. Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in Federal Employment and requires Federal employers not to discriminate against qualified job applicants or employees with disabilities.

The United States Government does not discriminate in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, political affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, disability and genetic information, age, membership in an employee organization, or other non-merit factor.

Q 9. Does the McCain Fellowship Program reimburse Fellows for their relocation costs upon appointment?

Relocation incentives may be offered based on program funding availability and fellow eligibility. The McCain Fellowship Program may offer a relocation incentive to Fellows who relocate upon their McCain appointment. The relocation incentive may only be offered to Fellows who relocate more than 50 miles to the new duty station area. To be eligible to receive the relocation incentive, Fellows must relocate no earlier than the acceptance of the Tentative Job Offer and will need to provide documents to the Program Office supporting the relocation. Fellows who accept the relocation 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 of the program during the fellowship year will result in the Fellow having to reimburse the Department for the incurred cost of the relocation incentive.

The McCain Program Office may also offer a relocation incentive at the end of the Fellowship to Fellows who are converted into a position within the Department of Defense and the new duty station is outside the 50-mile radius of their current duty station. A 1-year continued service agreement is required and removal or departure of the position during the 1 year will result in the employee having to reimburse the Department for the incurred cost of the relocation incentive.

Q 10. 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 McCain Fellowship Program may offer the Student Loan Repayment Incentive for Fellows who are selected into the Program. The Student Loan Repayment Incentive may only be offered to Fellows 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.

The McCain Fellowship Program Office may offer the Student Loan Repayment Incentive to Fellows who are converted to a position within a Department of Defense organization using the McCain Hiring Authority. Fellows who are converted to a DoD organization following their Fellowship are eligible for 3 additional years of Student Loan Repayment incentives with a new 3-year Continued Service Agreement for each consecutive year until the maximum of 7 years is reached. Employees who depart their position or are removed from their position will result in having to reimburse the Department for the incurred cost of the Student Loan Repayment Incentive during the signed Continued Service Agreement.

Q 11. 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. Any training costs incurred beyond the \$5,000 will be the responsibility of the hosting organization or the Fellow.

Applicant Eligibility

Q 1. I have an undergraduate degree but not an advanced degree. May I still apply?

The opportunity is open to any U.S. citizen or lawfully permanent resident. In order to be eligible to participate in the program, you must have a graduate degree or higher from an accredited institution of higher education; OR, will be awarded an advanced degree within 6 months after applying. The advanced degree must not have been awarded later than two years before the date of acceptance into the Fellowship program; OR, no later than six months after application.

Q 2. What is an advanced degree?

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

Q 3. I already have completed my advanced degree and heard about the McCain Fellowship Program. Can I still apply?

To be eligible, the advanced degree must not have been awarded later than two years before the date of acceptance into the Fellowship program or later (Master's degree or above)

completion. Applicants expecting to graduate within 6 months after applying are also eligible to apply. Applicants must meet all advanced degree requirements, including the completion and/or successful defense of any required thesis or dissertations to be eligible.

Q 4. I am currently pursuing my advanced degree and heard about the McCain Fellows Program. Can I still apply?

Students may apply during their last semester or year as long as they complete their advanced degree and graduate within 6 months after applying to the Fellowship Program. This includes the completion or successful defense of any required thesis or dissertation. If the applicant fails to graduate or receive their advanced degree within 6 months after applying to the program, even if selected, they cannot participate in the program and may be removed from the program. The McCain Fellows Program is a full time and competitive one-year fellowship program. McCain Fellows must be recent graduates and are not concurrently in school.

Q 5. 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.

Q 6. As a previously selected McCain Fellow, Can I re-apply for another cohort?

No, McCain Fellows can only be selected and participate once. They may not re-apply to the McCain Fellows Program for another cohort if previously participated.

Q 7. I joined the U.S. military after completing my advanced degree. Since my graduation is past the two-year window from the appointment date, am I still eligible to apply?

Under the Recent Graduate hiring authority, veterans are precluded from the two-year window due to their military service obligations. They will have up to 6 years after the completion of the advanced degree to apply. Applicants who may qualify as veterans must have served at least one four-year tour and have separated from the military during that 6-year period.

Q 8. I am currently a government employee. Can I apply to the McCain Fellows Program?

Current government employees may apply to the McCain Fellows Program. However, this is a one-year leadership program in which the appointment ends at 52 weeks. Conversion to a permanent Federal position is not guaranteed.

Q 9. 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.

Q 10. The application requirements include “Passing background and security investigations,” do I need to have a security clearance when I apply?

A security clearance at the time of application is not required. If selected, Fellows will undergo a security clearance process and must successfully pass and obtain a security clearance to become an official McCain Fellow. Prospective applicants holding a clearance at the time of the application are still eligible to apply.

Supporting Documents

Q 1. What resume format should be used? Should it be a “Federal Resume”?

Applicant’s resume should be in a federal resume format and must contain the following at a minimum: applicant name, contact information and email address, educational institution, qualifying degree programs, and work experience. Work experience should include: job title, employer and supervisor name and contact, position status (full-time or part-time position), the number of hours worked per week, annual salary, detailed description of job duties, skills, and accomplishments. If work experience was in a federal position, series and grade as well as clearance level should be included. Additional information about federal resumes can be found on USAJobs and on the McCain Fellows Program website.

Q 2. What is the Mobility/Relocation and Participant Agreement?

This agreement is provided at the time of application to inform applicants of potential relocation requirement based on rotational assignment designation upon selection. This is to inform and prepare the applicants that final rotation locations can be anywhere in the U.S. This agreement also addresses the Minimum Service Requirement and reimbursement due to DoD if Fellows voluntarily resigns or involuntarily removed for cause, insubordination or poor performance prior to completion of one-year fellowship (graduation).

Q 3. Do I have to sign the “DoD McCain Strategic Defense Fellows Program Mobility/Relocation and Participant Agreement”?

Yes, applicants/Fellows are required to review, acknowledge, sign, understand and abide by the DoD McCain Strategic Defense Fellows Program Mobility/Relocation and Participation Agreement document. The agreement outlines program requirements, fellows’ responsibilities, mobility and relocation requirements, minimum service requirement, and reimbursement due to DoD from fellows. Reimbursement is due to DoD if the fellow voluntarily resigns and fail to serve the required minimum period of time, or the fellow is removed for cause, poor performance, misconduct or insubordination prior to graduation.

Q 4. The application package requires two letters of recommendation and an endorsement letter. What is the difference between a letter of recommendation and 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. 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. An endorsement letters should come from the applicant's graduate institution of higher education.

Q 5. Can faculties in graduate programs nominate more than one applicant?

Yes, graduate programs may nominate as many qualified applicants as they wish

Q 6. I applied during the last application period and was not selected. Can I use the letters of recommendations from my previous application to apply for the upcoming application period?

Yes, applications who previously applied and were not selected may reuse the letter of recommendations for the upcoming application period. Applicants can submit previous recommendation letters as long as the issued dates are within one year.

Q 7. 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.

Q 8. 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 are no page limit or character limit for the essay of interest and motivation in working for the Department of Defense.

Educational Requirements / Transcripts

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

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

Q 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, finalists will need to arrange to have their official conferred transcript sent to the Program Office during the onboarding phase.

Q 3. I am currently pursuing my advanced degree and have not yet graduated. I will graduate within the 6-month time frame of applying to the program. My conferred transcript will not be available until then. How do I apply?

Applicants who will graduate within the 6-month period of applying to the program 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 will have up to 6 months after their start date to submit their conferred graduate transcripts to the Programs Office. Failure to provide a conferred graduate transcript during that 6-month period will result in removal from the program.

Q 4. I am a U.S citizen but have received my advanced degree from a foreign university. Am I still eligible to apply and will the program office accept my transcripts?

Applicants with advanced degrees earned from foreign universities are still eligible to apply and may include foreign transcripts in their application package. If they are selected, they will need to utilize a Department of Education approved credential evaluation service to determine if their advanced degree earned from their foreign institution is equivalent to the U.S. educational standards. Advanced degrees earned from a foreign university must be deemed as equivalent to an advanced degree earned from a U.S accredited university or educational institution. If the applicant is selected, the applicant must arrange to have a credential evaluation letter sent directly from the credential evaluation agency to the McCain Program Office

For further information on credentialing services for foreign education, refer to the U.S. Department of Education’s website below. Click on “Information for Persons Seeking to Work in the United States” and review section titled “Selecting a Credential Evaluating Service”. From the same webpage referenced below, you may also click on “Accreditation and Quality Assurance” in the See Also box on the right hand side of the webpage and click on “Post-Secondary Accreditation”. This document will provide you a list of accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

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Q 5. I have an advanced degree from a foreign university and my credential evaluation letter was received by the program office. How will the credential evaluation letter be used?

Finalists will have up to 6 months after the program acceptance date to successfully submit a credential evaluation letter to the McCain Program Office. Applicants with an advanced foreign degree will remain in the program if the Program Office receives a favorable credential evaluation letter. If the program office receives a non-favorable credential evaluation letter, the Program Office cannot accept the foreign degree and the selectee will be removed from the Program.

Q 6. What is a U.S. accredited university or educational institution?

U.S. accredited universities are educational institutions that have been accredited and meets acceptable levels of quality. To determine if your educational institution is U.S. accredited, visit the U.S. Department of Education, and conduct a search under the Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institution and Programs. The website is: <https://ope.ed.gov/dapip/#/home>.

Q 7. Does my degree have to be earned from a U.S. accredited university or educational institution to be accepted by the McCain Fellowship Program?

Yes, only degrees earned from a U.S. accredited university or educational institution can be accepted by the McCain Fellowship Program. The sole exception applies to applicants who earned degrees from a foreign educational institution and further stipulations apply to those applicants.

Application Process

Q 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. Application period status and announcements will also be shared through info sessions and posted on school job posting platforms such as Handshake, Symplicity, etc.

Applicants may also find the McCain Application Announcement on USAJobs during the application period.

Q 2. Where do I apply for the next McCain Cohort?

Prospective applicants will apply through the McCain Fellowship Job Posting on USAJobs. The application announcement will be posted on USAJobs during the application period. To learn about the application period dates, please refer to the McCain Fellows public website.

Q 3. 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.

Q 4. 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 USAJobs. 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 3 weeks and applicants will be notified if and when they are referred for selection.

Q 5. How are applicants evaluated?

Applicants are evaluated based on their overall application package as well as their eligibility and qualification for the positions being filled. The Program Office will evaluate each applicant to determine if they are eligible and qualified to fill the positions needed and will refer qualified

applicants to participating DoD organizations. Participating organizations will evaluate referred applicants and interview interested candidates.

Q 6. 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 may be notified of their status.

Q 7. I received a Tentative Job Offer (TJO) for more than one participating DoD organization. Can I accept more than one TJO?

No, finalists who received a TJO for more than one participating DoD organization can only accept one offer. The finalist will determine which offer to accept.

Q 8. I accepted a Tentative Job Offer and initiated the Security Clearance process. 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. At a minimum, an interim clearance will need to be granted before a Firm Job Offer can be extended. There are some sponsoring organizations that require a fully adjudicated clearance prior to onboarding employees and if that is the case, the Fellow will need to wait for the fully adjudicated clearance before receiving the Firm Job Offer. The adjudication process is longer than the interim clearance process and may take up to a year.

There are cases in which a clearance process can delay the individual's start date. An individual's clearance may be withheld during the process for further investigation and in which case, may delay their start date. In addition, some sponsoring organizations may require additional security checks following the granted clearance status.

Q 9. The McCain Fellowship states that Drug Testing is required. What is the "Drug Testing" requirement?

During the one-year fellowship, McCain Fellows are federal government employees and considered "Testing Designated Positions." Upon selection, McCain Fellows must complete and successfully pass pre-employment drug screening prior to onboarding. McCain Fellows will be instructed to complete a drug test for illegal drugs. McCain Fellows who fail to report to the drug testing facility, refuse to undergo the test after appearing at the collection site, or test positive for the presence of illegal drugs will have their employment offer withdrawn. Federal laws apply.

Q 10. As an applicant, what does the process look like between submitting an application and being selected as a Fellow?

Once the application period close, sponsoring organizations will review application packages of qualified candidates. Semi-finalist will be interviewed by participating DoD organizations who will make the final selection. The McCain Program Office will extend Tentative Job Offers to finalists and initiate the onboarding process. Finalists will need to complete all requirements of the onboarding process including the drug testing. During the onboarding process, finalists will be contacted by WHS Security office to initiate the security clearance process. Upon completion of the onboarding requirements and a favorable clearance, finalists will receive a Final Job Offer (FJO) and further instructions to onboard the program.

Q 11. Are there any additional resources that may help me with the application process?

The McCain Fellowship Program website lists the application requirements, process and provides resources that include the following:

- McCain Fellows Program Fact Sheet and FAQs
- McCain Fellows Positions: Positions open for applications are listed under this section. Each position listing includes a description of duties and knowledge required.
- Application Process and Resources: Tips on how to write a “Federal Resume” is found in this section and may guide you in how to prepare you resume for your application.

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