

THE STRUGGLE FOR MILITARY DIVERSITY

Years of effort bring little change in officer corps

Donna Bryson | REUTERS

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – Pale marble pavers crisscross the Terrazzo, the plaza at the heart of the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado that cadets traverse daily, on the way to class, the library and meals. In their first year, cadets must run and keep to the narrow marble strips whenever they are on the 20-acre Terrazzo.

Tusajigwe Owens doesn't take shortcuts. He is one of 112 Black cadets in the class of 1,071 freshmen that started at the academy in June 2022.

Running the strips helps instill a sense of urgency and attention to detail that "absolutely matters for the success of yourself and the success of your team," he said.

Older cadets share coping strategies such as organizing schedules to minimize Terrazzo trips, or walking when the marble is slippery in wet weather. "They would rather see you succeed," Owens said. Not everyone will. The graduation rate for Black cadets has for the last decade averaged 66%, compared to an overall graduation rate of 80%.

That gap has frustrated the Air Force's stated objective of increasing diversity in its officer corps. Only 6% of officers identify as Black, compared to about 17% among enlisted members of the Air Force, according to the Air Force Personnel Center.

Those figures have changed very little in the last 20 years, according to an Air Force spokesperson.

By comparison, around 13% of America's population is Black.

On June 29, days after Owens finished his first year, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down race-conscious admissions at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina in a case brought by Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), a group that argues that affirmative action policies discriminate against white and Asian American people.

Chief Justice John Roberts exempted military training academies from the decision, citing the U.S. government argument that the legitimacy of the armed forces would be undermined by having an overwhelmingly white officer corps leading much more diverse enlisted ranks. In the fall, the SFFA expanded its challenge to the military's elite training academies, suing to block the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, from considering race as a factor in admissions.

The Supreme Court in February declined an SFFA request to intervene in the West Point case. SFFA founder Edward Blum told Reuters the group would continue to challenge the military's admissions policies through the lower courts, where the cases are

See DIVERSITY, Page 7NN

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