

### Clarifying Guidance Would Enhance Effectiveness of Honor and Conduct Systems

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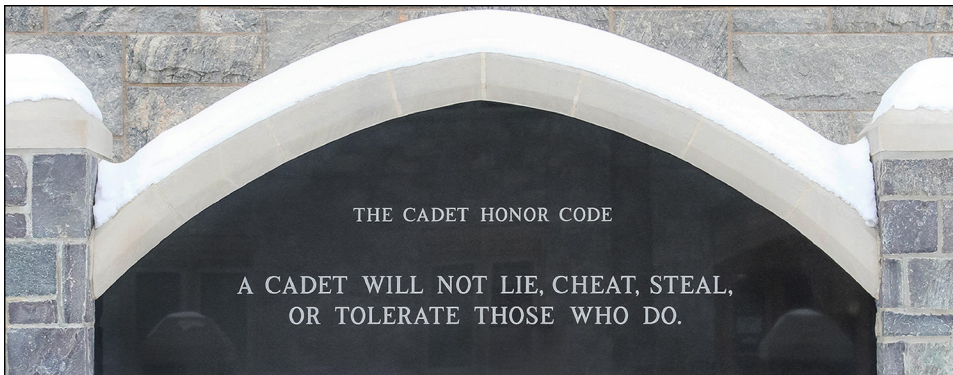
A report to congressional committees

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#### What GAO Found

The service academies—West Point, Naval, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine—operate honor and conduct systems to help ensure students adhere to expected ethical and moral standards. Each academy has student-led honor systems to enforce honor codes that prohibit lying, cheating, and stealing; each also has officer-led conduct systems to maintain good order and discipline. However, key differences exist across the academies' systems, such as the use of hearings and the right to appeal hearing findings or punishments.

##### West Point Cadet Honor Code



Source: U.S. Military Academy at West Point/Jorge Garcia. | GAO-26-107049

Typically, each academy offers procedural due process protections to help ensure that students accused of an honor or conduct offense receive a fair hearing. The academies offer most of the 12 common due process protections GAO reviewed, but some academies' guidance does not clearly specify the availability of certain protections. For example, two academies do not provide clear guidance on students' rights to access a complete record of their proceeding. By reviewing and revising honor and conduct system guidance to clearly articulate available protections, the academies can help ensure students are informed of their rights when engaging with processes that could impede their ability to graduate and serve as officers.

The honor and conduct offense data collected by the academies are not always complete or easily accessible. Specifically, some academies do not collect data on certain stages of their honor and conduct systems, such as investigations or appeals. Further, officials from four academies said they faced challenges in accessing relevant data. Addressing these challenges would improve the academies' ability to manage their systems with quality information.

Students GAO surveyed at the academies generally reported favorable opinions about their honor and conduct systems but raised some concerns about their fairness. Between about 25 to 45 percent of students, depending on the academy, said honor system findings were not applied fairly to all students, while about 40 to 55 percent said the same for conduct. Students also stated a reluctance to report honor offenses and minor conduct offenses. However, around 50 to 80 percent of students, depending on the academy, were willing to report major conduct offenses.

#### Why GAO Did This Study

The service academies seek to graduate military officers with high ethical and moral standards. Students who violate these standards may be disenrolled.

House Report 118-125 includes two provisions for GAO to review academies' honor and conduct processes. This report assesses the extent to which (1) academy honor and conduct systems compare to one another and provide common procedural due process protections, and (2) academies collect honor and conduct data. It also describes (3) the perceptions of students toward their respective academies' honor and conduct systems.

GAO reviewed academy policies and honor and conduct data for academic years 2018-2019 through 2023-2024. It also surveyed 6,984 students across the five academies. The survey results are generalizable to the sophomore through senior population at each respective academy. Complete survey results can be viewed at GAO-26-108179. GAO also interviewed academy officials and conducted site visits to each academy.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 13 recommendations, including that the academies assess and update honor and conduct system guidance to ensure that due process protections are clearly articulated and include data collection requirements for all system stages. GAO also recommends the academies address challenges that limit timely access to data. The Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and Transportation concurred with all recommendations.