

2026 SURVEY OF USAFA GRADUATES

Executive Summary

Understanding Engagement Across the Long Blue Line | Reviewed, August 2026

Purpose and Goals

The 2026 Survey of USAFA Graduates follows the baseline study conducted in 2022 and provides an updated assessment of how graduates relate to the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Association of Graduates. The study was designed not only to measure attitudes, but also to understand what strengthens or weakens graduate pride, what graduates want the AOG to prioritize, and whether graduates believe the AOG’s service-focused mission should include advocacy.

The research had three primary goals:

- Measure progress against the 2022 baseline on graduate pride, connection, and opinion of the AOG.
- Identify the services, institutional priorities, and forms of support graduates most want the AOG to emphasize.
- Assess whether graduates think advocacy should fit within the current service-focused AOG mission and, if so, where its boundaries should be.

Research Approach

A 10-minute online survey was conducted during March 2026. In all, 8,963 graduates participated, yielding a 20% response rate; 7,893 completed the full questionnaire. Data were weighted by graduation decade and sex to represent the graduate population. The margin of sampling error for the total sample is approximately +/- 1 percentage point at the 95% confidence level; smaller subgroups have larger margins of error.

The study also generated extensive qualitative evidence. More than 7,000 graduates answered each of the open-ended questions about what makes them most and least proud of USAFA, and more than 3,600 described additional priorities for the next three years. These comments were systematically coded and analyzed alongside the quantitative results.

8,963 graduates participated	73% rate current USAFA pride 7-10	76% Of AOG time to be allocated to service versus advocacy	61% rank cadet and Academy support first or second among priorities
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Executive overview

Graduate connection to USAFA remains strong, but pride has softened and the meaning graduates attach to the institution is less settled. The most important story is not simply that graduates disagree. It is that they often disagree because different generations experienced, internalized, and now defend different understandings of the same formative institution.

Key Findings

Pride has softened, especially among graduates closest to USAFA's present

Overall pride remains positive, but it is less intense than it was four years ago. The percentage rating their pride at 7-10 declined from 80% in 2022 to 73% in 2026. Top-two-box pride, ratings of 9 or 10, fell from 40% to 34%. When graduates reflected on pride across their personal USAFA journey, 38% said they are very proud of USAFA today, down from 50% in 2022 and lower than at any earlier point measured.

The decline is not evenly distributed. It is most pronounced among graduates from 2010 forward, active-duty graduates, civilians with no current military affiliation, and female graduates. These groups are often closest to the Academy's present-day environment or experience its effects most directly.

The relationship itself remains remarkably stable

Even as pride softened, graduate identity with USAFA changed very little. Seventy-nine percent continue to identify with one of the three pride-oriented personas: Actively Engaged and Connecting, Proud and Show It, or Inwardly Proud. The persona distribution is nearly identical to 2022. This distinction is important: attitudes can move while a formative relationship endures. Most graduates have not detached from USAFA; rather, many are negotiating how the institution they remember relates to the institution they see today.

What fosters pride is formation, accomplishment, standards, and belonging

Graduates' strongest sources of pride are rooted in what USAFA asked of them and what it helped them become. Broadly coded comments most often referenced prestige, honor, and tradition (44%); completing a challenging and rigorous program (41%); and the people, friendships, and shared experiences that came with the Academy (38%). At the more detailed level, graduates repeatedly cited endurance, program rigor, academic and military excellence, service, integrity, high standards, and the accomplishment of joining the Long Blue Line.

This is more than nostalgia. Pride is grounded in formation: the challenge graduates completed, the standards they internalized, the service they rendered, and the community to which they belong.

What inhibits pride is less about performance than meaning and direction

Comments about diminished pride tell a different story. Among those who responded, 31% described changing values or traditions, 26% said they believe politics has too much of a role at USAFA, and 23% described conflicting views. Leadership, scandals, "woke" culture, warrior identity, and institutional direction also appeared frequently. By contrast, relatively few comments focused on academics, training, rigor, or discipline as core performance failures.

The comments include sharply opposing political viewpoints. Some believe USAFA has moved too far in one direction or the other of the political spectrum. The common concern is not a single ideology. It is the perceived fear that external political forces are defining what USAFA says, signals, or stands for.

The central pattern

Graduates agree strongly about the importance of USAFA, its mission, and the values through which they understand it. On politics, there is spirited disagreement.

The Story Beneath the Data

USAFA is not simply remembered; it is internalized

USAFA is intentionally formative. It does not merely provide an education; it shapes judgment, discipline, loyalty, and a sense of duty and identity as a graduate. The bond often begins before inprocessing, when a future cadet chooses an institution whose mission, standards, and promise feel aligned with the person he or she hopes to become. The experience then becomes part of a graduate's moral memory: not only what happened at USAFA, but what it meant and what the institution taught them to value. This is their lens on almost all things USAFA.

That helps explain why change can feel highly personal. Graduates often evaluate later versions of the Academy against the version that formed them. They may, in effect, say: "I know what this place is, because it made me." When they believe the Academy moves away from that understanding, change can be experienced not as ordinary institutional evolution, but as a departure from something foundational to them and their identity.

Different eras produced different experiences of the same institution

Graduates encountered USAFA within different national, military, and social environments. The Cold War, Vietnam, the Reagan era, the Global War on Terrorism, rapidly changing social expectations, competing visions, and feelings of societal polarization today all shaped the context in which graduates experienced the Academy as cadets. The survey comments suggest that different generations consequently emphasize different aspects of USAFA: merit and discipline, duty amid conflict, strength and patriotism, the professional military, future readiness, and institutional identity.

These are not competing histories in which one generation is correct and another is mistaken. Rather, the survey feedback indicates that these are different lived experiences of the same institution. The conflict becomes difficult when each generation comes to regard the Academy it experienced as the Academy's true character and sees later changes as something to be resisted or reversed.

The pillars provide a shared center

Across those eras, the current Air Force core values provide enduring institutional language:

Integrity First

Service Before Self

Excellence in All We Do

The values themselves, adopted at the Academy in 1994 and by the Air Force in 1995, remain recognizable across generations, even when graduates interpret their application differently. They provide a way to understand both continuity and disagreement: graduates may disagree about a policy, a leader, or a cultural change while still asking whether USAFA is acting with integrity, service, excellence, and fidelity to officer development.

The findings do not suggest that the AOG should pretend politics is absent. Politics is often the visible language through which much of the conflict is expressed. But if the situation is understood only as politics, the response will be too narrow and arguments over which side should prevail will persist. When the conflict is understood as a struggle over institutional meaning, connection and memory, a more useful path emerges: acknowledge the disagreement, distinguish enduring commitments from historical evolution, and keep the Academy's own mission and values at the center.

A different lens

The goal is not to erase political disagreement. It is to prevent politics from becoming the primary frame through which graduates understand the Academy and one another. The shared values and the Honor Code, as examples, can provide a common language and bind graduates amidst societal upheaval.

What Graduates Want from the AOG

Opinion is stable, but the relationship can be stronger

Overall opinion of the AOG is nearly unchanged from 2022: 41% rate it positively at 7-10, but 15% give a top-two-box rating. Six in ten graduates are at least somewhat familiar with the Association & Foundation's joint mission, although familiarity is substantially lower among newer and active-duty graduates.

Graduates want the AOG to support USAFA first

When asked to rank potential AOG priorities, graduates placed support for cadets and the Academy first, with 61% ranking it first or second. Preservation of heritage and tradition followed at 54%. Career support, communication, networking, and support for chapters and shared-interest groups were valued, but none approached the same level. Open-ended priorities reinforced this pattern: graduates emphasized graduate support and connection, an apolitical and nonpartisan military culture, mission and warfighting preparation, honor and ethics, standards, traditions, and heritage.

The emphasis varies by generation. Older graduates place more weight on heritage, tradition, communication, honor, and military preparation. Newer graduates, active-duty graduates, and female graduates more often prioritize cadet support, career support, connection, and keeping the Academy's military culture apolitical. The differences are meaningful, but they still point back to USAFA and the graduate community rather than to broad external causes.

Graduates prioritize service; advocacy has a more limited mandate

Graduates see the AOG primarily as a service organization. On average, they would devote 76% of its time and resources to service and 24% to advocacy. Their views also suggest clear boundaries around any advocacy role: about three in ten prefer no public-policy advocacy, about half favor advocacy focused primarily on graduate services and support for USAFA, and only about two in ten are comfortable extending advocacy to broader Air Force, Space Force, or military issues.

For those situations in which the AOG does engage in advocacy, USAFA itself has by far the strongest mandate. Seventy-two percent support advocacy for USAFA and its needs, compared with 45% for Air Force and Space Force missions, 43% for graduate hardships, 37% for the military broadly, and 12% for broad humanitarian or moral causes.

Stewardship is the clearest role to emerge

Taken together, the findings point toward a stewardship model for the AOG's role. In that role, the AOG can:

- Protect USAFA's mission, integrity, and capacity to form officers for the future.
- Support cadets, graduates, and the graduate community across generations and viewpoints.
- Preserve the Academy's heritage, traditions, and institutional continuity.
- Articulate what the Academy represents when external pressures threaten to define it through political terms alone.

The enduring conclusion

The most important finding is not that graduate politics are divided. It is that USAFA remains larger than those divisions. The AOG's strongest position is not to become another political voice, but to help graduates hear the Academy's own voice — grounded in integrity, service, excellence, a timeless Honor Code, officer formation, heritage, and the Long Blue Line itself.

The 2026 survey therefore offers more than a measurement of pride or a list of requested services. It provides a lens for understanding why graduate disagreement has become so intense and where common ground still exists. The Academy formed graduates who know how to defend what they believe matters. The task is to keep that strength connected to a shared institution, even while politics continues to swirl around it.