

# Dept. of Military Affairs: 94 cadets graduate Wisconsin Challenge Academy's 50th class

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BARABOO, Wis. — In an emotional and optimistic ceremony attended by family and friends, 94 cadets graduated from the residential phase of the Wisconsin Challenge Academy during a June 21 ceremony at Baraboo High School.

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy began in 1998. This ceremony marked the conclusion of the program's 50th class.

Located at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Challenge Academy is a National Guard-sponsored alternative education program designed to help young adults at risk of not graduating high school to redirect their lives by developing the values, skills, education and self-discipline needed to successfully transition to adulthood. There is no cost to participate.

The Challenge Academy program has two phases. The first phase is in residence at Fort McCoy for 22 weeks, and immerses participants in a quasi-military setting. The second phase lasts 12 months and begins upon graduation. Mentors paired with cadets during the residential phase help guide the cadets as they follow a post-residential action plan designed to accomplish education, employment and life goals.

"You should be incredibly proud of all you've accomplished in the last 22 weeks," said Joni Mathews, Wisconsin Challenge Academy director. "You demonstrated dedication, discipline and courage to develop skills that built your character and will help you reach your full potential in life."

“Remember — your character guides your thoughts,” Mathews continued. “Your thoughts guide your choices. And your choices guide your actions.”

Several cadets were recognized during the ceremony for their achievements over the past few months: Overall Physical Fitness, Devin Skenandore-James of Keshana, Wisconsin; Most Improved Physical Fitness, Marissa Silbaugh of Janesville, Wisconsin; Most Responsible Follower, Lane Villareal of Kenosha, Wisconsin; Best Supply Assistant, Estrella Martinez Rand of Green Bay, Wisconsin; Best Battle Buddy, Maickol Torres Torres of Madison, Wisconsin; Academic Resilience, Sincerie Hayes of Beloit, Wisconsin; Best Archer, John Brooks of Watertown, Wisconsin; and Distinguished Honor Graduate, Allius White Eagle of Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

During the past 22 weeks, cadets collectively marched more than 21,000 miles and completed nearly 5,000 hours of community service while individually earning seven college course credits.

“The Academy taught us to think before we act as we move through life,” White Eagle told his fellow cadets during the ceremony. “Think and then do. The Academy taught us the importance of discipline, integrity, courage and commitment so that we are equipped to make the right choices in life — that we choose the harder right rather than the easier wrong.”

Keynote speaker Ryan Lonergan, an advocate for veterans nationwide, urged cadets to embrace their new experience.

“You enrolled in a program that is bigger than yourself,” Lonergan said. “For 22 weeks, you were immersed in a program that taught you skills about life. As you move forward, it’s important to surround yourself with people that will challenge you, inspire you and help you continue to grow as a person.”

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy conducts two classes per year — January to June, and July to December. The curriculum, developed by the National Guard Bureau, is based on the experiential learning model and consists of eight core components — academic excellence, physical training, job skills, service to community, health and hygiene, responsible citizenship, leadership/followership, and life coping skills. Character development is integrated and emphasized throughout the curriculum.

The Wisconsin Challenge Academy is currently accepting applications for its 51st class, which begins July 19.