

**2026 Model NATO Challenge Scholarship Program**

Norfolk NATO Festival is a non-profit organization founded in 1953, just one year after the establishment of NATO's Allied Command Atlantic (now called Allied Command Transformation) in Norfolk, Virginia. In that year, the citizens of Norfolk organized a salute to these allied forces in order to create new friendships, provide a basis for cultural exchange, pursue new lines of trade between Norfolk and the world, and to recognize NATO’s role in maintaining peace and stability in the world.

Working in cooperation with Norfolk’s NATO Headquarters, Supreme Allied Command Transformation and Norfolk Public Schools, the Festival started the Model NATO Challenge in 2007 to provide a unique opportunity for high school juniors and seniors interested in the advancement of international studies. Students who are selected to participate in the Challenge serve as Student Diplomats in a role-playing exercise which simulates real world issues faced by today’s NATO Alliance. 32 students and 10 alternates will be chosen to participate and assigned to represent one of the 32 NATO member nations.

**Scholarship Description**: This scholarship program is designed to recognize the achievement of those Student Diplomats who have demonstrated excellence in the execution of their assigned responsibilities. Scholarships are paid directly to the college or university of the winning student’s choice. Three scholarships will be awarded: one at $2,500, one at $1,500, and one at $1,000. Scholarships are non-renewable. This is an opportunity that will enhance a young adult’s resume and reflect on a robust and invaluable experience that elevates a college application to the next level.

*All dates below are subject to change.*

**Where/When: Monday, March 16th 2026 · Location: Virginia Wesleyan University**

Refreshments will be provided.

**Eligibility:** Applicants must be: 1) Enrolled Coastal Area of Southeastern Virginia high school freshmen, sophomores, juniors or seniors in good standing as a full-time student with intentions of continuing to college or university; 2) Previous Model NATO Challenge Scholarship winners are not eligible to apply.

In order to be considered for a scholarship, you must submit your application by the following deadlines:

**Essay Format –** **January 7, 2026** (application, teacher recommendation, and essay to be submitted)

*OR*

**Panel Interview Format –** **December 17, 2025** (application and teacher recommendation to be submitted)

Materials received after these deadlines will not be considered.

**Criteria:** Selected participants will be evaluated based upon the following:

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| --- | --- |
| OPTION I: |  |
| Essay – Diplomat’s ability to follow formatting instructions – *application process only* | 10% |
| Essay – Diplomat’s originality, organization of ideas, and accuracy of facts – *application process only* | 90% |
| OPTION II: |  |
| Panel Interview – Diplomat’s ability to communicate in a clear, effective manner – *application process only* | 50% |
| Panel Interview – Diplomat’s ability to work towards a consensus with all NATO member nations – *application process only* | 50% |

**Model NATO Challenge Scholarship Application**

**Please include the following with your application:**

* 600-750 word essaythat clearly demonstrates your level of knowledge about NATO, its member nations, its purpose and/or its stand on issues of current events **\*Essay NOT applicable to applications submitted for the Panel Interview format only.**
* A letter of recommendation from school guidance counselor or teacher **\*Required for ALL applications submitted.**

*Please provide your best email address, which you check frequently.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Student Name: | High School: | Graduation Year: |
| Address: | Student Email Address: | |
| City: Zip Code: | Student Phone: | |
| NATO Country Interested in Representing (suggest 3)  1.  2.  3. | Check One: Deadlines:  ESSAY APPLICATION Jan 7, 2026  PANEL INTERVIEW APPLICATION Dec 17, 2025 | |
| Parent or Guardian: | \*Please note: For Panel Interview Applications, you will be notified of your scheduled interview timeslot/details. Panel Interview Date is **Thursday, January 8, 2026 between 5pm-8pm** and will take place virtually. | |
| Relationship to Applicant: | Parent or Guardian Email Address: | |
| Address, City, Zip Code: | Parent or Guardian Phone: | |
| Teacher Sponsor Name: | Teacher Sponsor Email Address & Phone: | |
| Do you have any accessibility needs? |  | |

**As an applicant for Norfolk NATO Festival’s scholarship opportunity, I have read and understand the Student Diplomat requirements.**

Signature of Student Applicant Date

Signature of Parent or Guardian Date

**Postmark Deadline**: **December 23, 2025.** **Send completed application and materials to: Norfolk NATO Festival, Attention: Norfolk NATO Festival Director of Operations, 440 Bank Street, Norfolk, VA 23510 or via email to** [**mdiaz@vafest.org**](mailto:mdiaz@vafest.org)for faster processing**.** The Norfolk NATO Festival reserves the right to amend this application without notice; however, any amendments shall not prejudice current applicants based on the criteria given in this announcement. Email [education@vafest.org](mailto:education@vafest.org) with questions.

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**2026 Model NATO Challenge**

**Teacher/Counselor Recommendation**

**Student Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**School:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Teacher’s/Counselor’s Name Printed:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Teacher’s/Counselor’s Signature:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Email:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Phone:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Norfolk NATO Festival 440 Bank Street, Norfolk, VA 23510 757.282.2801**

**Model NATO Challenge Applicant Requirements**

***Essay***

Essay applicants must submit, along with your application and teacher/counselor recommendation, an essay by **January 7, 2026** in order to be considered**.** Materials received after the deadline will not be considered.

The following essay parameters must be followed in order for applicants to be eligible for a scholarship. Applications will be evaluated based on the enclosed Essay Format rubric.

**Formatting:**

* 600-750 words
* Grammatically correct with references cited
* Indicate on the first page of the essay which topic number you have chosen to write about.

**Content:**

* Essay should be focused, reflect critical thinking, and include research and other supportive details.
* Essay should be grammatically correct and contain a bibliography and references.

***Panel Interview***

Panel Interview applicants must submit the application and teacher/counselor recommendation by **December 17, 2025** in order to be confirmed for the *January 8, 2026 Panel Interview Date* for scholarship consideration. Applicants will be evaluated based on the enclosed Panel Interview Format rubric.

**Essay & Panel Interview Topic Options:**

Option 1: Topic: NATO Multi-Domain Operations

NATO has five warfare domains: Air, Land, Sea, Space, Cyber. Here in Norfolk, Allied Command Transformation is currently writing NATO’s multi-domain operations concept, or the concept that will help NATO nations operate in a wartime environment across all domains effectively.

As of today, Multi-Domain Operations means different things to different Nations and, as always, NATO has the challenge of explaining it in a manner that is acceptable, relevant and understood by all 32 members. What does multi-domain operations mean to you and how could NATO get 32 nations to work together across all domains? Remember, we cannot win a war only in the air, only by sea, or on the web-, We must work across all domains.

Option 2: Topic: NATO’s Collective Defense

NATO is a **defensive Alliance only** – it will never offensively start a war. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty outlines the concept of “Collective Defense.” Collective Defense means that when one **NATO member nation** is attacked, it would be considered an attack on **all NATO nations**. In this situation, the Alliance **as a whole** could act in **defense** of the one attacked nation. Do you think NATO should remain a defensive Alliance only, or do you think NATO should re-write the North Atlantic Treaty to be an offensive Alliance? Do you think NATO should defend non-NATO nations? Or keep its scope to only member nations?

***Preparation for Model NATO Challenge***

The Model NATO Challenge is an exciting simulation modeled on the North Atlantic Council (NATO’s highest decision-making body), where Student Diplomats are confronted, through a crisis scenario, with real-life challenges to the Alliance. While representing the interests of their assigned country, Student Diplomats will be asked to work with each other in order to reach consensus on a specific course of action to address the crisis scenario. Student Diplomats will need to prepare in advance of the exercise by:

* Engaging in independent study to understand the nation he/she has been selected to represent
* Working with their mentor to discuss their assigned nation’s interests during study sessions
* Completing the Model NATO Online Course modules

Student Diplomats will receive information regarding Model NATO Challenge requirements and will have the opportunity to meet their mentor at the Program Orientation meeting. There will be one formal, organized study session.

On the day of the Challenge, selected Student Diplomats will be evaluated on the following weighted criteria:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Model NATO – Diplomat’s ability to represent their assigned nation’s interests – event day | 50% |
| Model NATO – Diplomat’s ability to work towards a consensus with all NATO member nations – event day | 50% |

***Important Dates and Required Events - subject to change***

Wednesday, January 14, 2026 Student Notification of Acceptance

Wednesday, February 4, 2026 Program Orientation – Virginia Arts Festival

440 Bank St, Norfolk, VA 23510

To be Determined - February 2026 Field Trip to ACT NATO HQ, Norfolk Naval Base

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 MNC Study Night – Virginia Wesleyan University

Monday, March 16, 2026 Model NATO Challenge – Virginia Wesleyan University

Monday, March 31, 2026 Scholarship Award Notification

Thursday, April 16, 2026 Norfolk NATO Festival’s Flag Raising Ceremony & Introduction of Student Diplomats at the Virginia International Tattoo

Saturday, April 18, 2026 Participation in Norfolk NATO Festival’s Parade & International Village

***Requirements for Scholarship Winners***

* Award is a one-time occurrence. Past winners are ineligible to receive another scholarship.
* If a winner does not enroll or attend college or university within a year after high school graduation, student will forfeit the scholarship.
* Scholarships are sent directly to the college or university to pay for tuition only; the Festival does not award cash/check directly to students.
* Winners are required to provide the following info for scholarship transmittal: copy of their acceptance/intent letter, their university student ID number, and address for the university student finance office. Failure to submit may result in the forfeiture of the scholarship.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| OPTION I:  Rubric for Student Diplomat Applications - **Essay Portion** - Model NATO Challenge | | | | | |
|  | Limited Proficiency - None | Some Proficiency | Proficiency | High Proficiency | Rating |
|  | 0-1 points | 2 points | 3 points | 4-5 points | 0-5 |
| Thesis/Focus, Originality | Thesis is missing. | Thesis may be obvious or unimaginative. | Thesis is somewhat original. | Develops a fresh insight that challenges the reader's thinking. |  |
| Thesis/Focus, Clarity | Reader cannot determine thesis & purpose **or** Thesis has no relation to the writing task. | Thesis and purpose are somewhat vague **or** Thesis is only loosely related to the writing task. | Thesis and purpose are fairly clear and match the writing task. | Thesis and purpose are clear to the reader; closely match the writing task. |  |
| Organization | Unclear organization **or** Organization plan is inappropriate to thesis. No transitions. | Some signs of logical organization. May have abrupt or illogical shifts and ineffective flow of ideas. | Organization supports thesis and purpose. Transitions are mostly appropriate. Sequence of ideas could be improved. | Fully and imaginatively supports thesis and purpose. Sequence of ideas is effective. Transitions are effective. |  |
| Support/Reasoning –  Ideas and Details | Offers simplistic, underdeveloped, or cryptic support for ideas. Inappropriate or off-topic generalizations, faulty assumptions, errors in fact. | Offers somewhat obvious support that may be too broad. Details are too general, not interpreted, irrelevant to thesis, or inappropriately repetitive. | Offers solid but less original reasoning. Assumptions are not always recognized or made explicit. Contains some appropriate details or examples. | Substantial, logical, and concrete development of ideas. Assumptions are made explicit. Details are germane, original, and convincingly interpreted. |  |
| Use of Sources and Documentation | Neglects important sources. Overuse of quotations or paraphrase to substitute writer's own ideas. | Uses relevant sources, but lacks a variety of sources and/or skillful combination of sources. Quotations and paraphrases may be too long and/or inconsistently referenced. | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform, but not substitute writer's own ideas. Does not over use quotes. | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform, but not substitute writer's own development of ideas. Combines material from a variety of sources, including personal observation, scientific data, and authoritative testimony. Does not over use quotes. |  |
| Grammar/Spelling/ Usage/Punctuation | Mechanical and usage errors so severe that writer's ideas are hidden | Repeated weaknesses in mechanics and usage. Punctuation flaws. | Mechanical and usage errors that do not interfere with meaning. | Essentially error free. Evidence of superior control of diction. |  |
| Presentation | Essay is untidy and does not follow basic, common formatting rules. | Essay looks fairly neat but violates some formatting rules. | Essay looks neat but violates one or two formatting rules. | Essay looks neat, crisp, and professional. |  |

OPTION II:

Rubric for Student Diplomat Applications - **Panel Interview Portion** - Model NATO Challenge

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Limited Proficiency - None | Some Proficiency | High Proficiency | Rating |
|  | 1 points | 2-3 points | 4-5 points | 0-5 |
| Communication, Preparation | Knows nothing about NATO, nations, or prompt topics. Seems to make up information. | Knows some general information about NATO, nations, or prompt topics. Provides somewhat vague, loosely related information. | Has researched NATO, nations, and/or prompt topics, and it is apparent by responses. |  |
| Communication, Focus/Clarity | Audience cannot determine purpose or responses have no relation to the prompts. | Responses are somewhat vague/fairly clear or responses are only loosely related to the prompts. | Responses are clear and closely relate to the prompts. |  |
| Communication, Support Reasoning – Ideas and Details | Offers simplistic, underdeveloped, or cryptic support for ideas. Inappropriate or off-topic generalizations. Faulty assumptions, obvious errors in fact. | Offers somewhat obvious support that may be too broad. Details are original and convincingly interpreted, or somewhat irrelevant to thesis or inappropriately repetitive. | Fully and imaginatively supports prompts. Sequence of ideas is effective. Transitions are effective. |  |
| Personal Attributes/General Attitude | Overbearing, overaggressive; or shy, reserved, and overly nervous. Displays lack of interest and enthusiasm. | Somewhat nervous, lapses in eye contact. Speaks too loudly or softly. Displays some interest and enthusiasm. | Good eye contact and poise during interview. Maintains constructive attitude, enthusiasm, and composure. |  |
| Diplomacy, Conduct/Presentation | Passive and indifferent. Fails to elaborate or explain. Does not display ideas in a diplomatic, effective manner. | Gives well-constructed responses, but sounds unsure. Displays ideas in a somewhat diplomatic, effective manner. Could be better prepared or informed on certain topics. | Gives well-constructed, confident responses in a diplomatic, effective manner. Well-prepared and enthusiastic about topics. |  |