

U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA)

Advisory Board

2025 Annual Report

To the Secretary of Transportation

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PREFACE

This fifth annual report of the USMMA Advisory Board provides the U.S. Secretary of Transportation (Secretary) Sean P. Duffy with advice and counsel on the state and future status of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA or the Academy), in accordance with the USMMA Advisory Board (Board) Charter. Per 46 U.S. Code 51313, the USMMA Advisory Board is responsible for advising the Secretary of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)/Maritime Administration (MARAD) Administrator, and the USMMA Superintendent on the course of academic instruction and management of the Academy, and on matters that need immediate and continued attention to advance the Academy toward meeting its strategic goals and objectives and to achieve its mission. Members of the Board were appointed by the Secretary of Transportation in January 2025.

The findings in this report are based on direct inspections, meetings and observations made before, during and following the Advisory Board's last meeting at the Academy (April 29, 2025); a remote video conference (Zoom/Teams) meeting by the Board; Board participation in the Academy's Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE, Middle States) reaccreditation visit on March 2-3, 2025; individual visits by Board members to the Academy; and oral reports and written documents provided to the Board by faculty and staff; survey data; and individual and small group discussions with midshipmen, faculty, staff, administration, alumni, members of the maritime industry, and higher education officials. The recommendations are based on the Board members' collective knowledge of best practices, emerging trends and issues in higher education and in the maritime industry, and on Board members' expertise.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report fulfills the statutory requirement for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) Advisory Board to report to the Secretary of Transportation about the status, accomplishments and challenges at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy over the past academic year.

The Advisory Board finds that USMMA leadership is strong, but its effectiveness has been limited by overly bureaucratic processes which have delayed hiring and acquisition, degraded IT and infrastructure, and hampered communications and progress. Given the importance of merchant mariners to our national security and economic prosperity, USMMA leadership and DOT must take swift decisive action to:

- Reverse the decline in infrastructure by hiring and empowering the right talent in key positions (Provost, Chief Financial Officer, IT Leadership)¹ and align its leadership team to move forward as one.
- Reinforce trust and accountability in USMMA by aligning executive authorities, being more transparent in financial reporting, and more proactive in communicating priorities, actions, and progress to DOT/the Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Administration, and
- Engage in focused sprints to quickly resolve Quality of Life issues and ensure the readiness of the Nation's Strategic Sealift Officers.

All of the issues and recommendations noted in this report impact the ability of the Academy to deliver on its core mission of providing Strategic Sealift Officers to the nation's secure maritime supply chain transportation in times of crisis and national emergency. Recent Administration efforts to revitalize the U.S. shipbuilding and maritime industry offer the promise of new investment in and attention to these needs, but accelerated funding, streamlined decision-making and swift actions are necessary to address the urgent need for sea-going merchant officers in the U.S. marine transportation system.

The Advisory Board proposes immediate actions, Figure 1, to be taken by the Academy and DOT within the next 180 days to address key challenges associated with infrastructure, governance and midshipmen quality of life. While the steps in Figure 1 are necessary, they are not sufficient to meet the Nation's need. Our merchant mariners are entering the industry that is advancing rapidly due to a variety of new technologies, including alternative fuels, high bandwidth communications, cybersecurity, robotics and autonomy. The Nation's Strategic Sealift Officers will require a fundamental understanding of each of these new and emerging applications. This will require a broader review and plan for additional students, faculty, and new curriculum to support these needs.

¹ In April 2025, USMMA hired a full-time experienced facilities executive, filling a key leadership gap.

Figure 1 – USMMA 180-day Priority Action Items

USMMA 180-day Priority Action Items

Infrastructure Planning and Improvements:

- ☐ USMMA must provide a monthly report on the backlog of deferred maintenance to DOT and demonstrate demonstrable progress in reducing the backlog within 180 days,
- ☐ USMMA must develop an accelerated plan for the proposed 9-year, \$1.5B infrastructure plan within 180 days, to include accelerated opening of Samuels Hall before November 2026. To do this, USMMA must finalize the proposed infrastructure plan, DOT must approve the plan, and the White House must concur with the approval within 180 days, with full funding provided by Congress, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designated as USMMA's Federal Construction Agent.
- ☐ USMMA must hire a Chief Academic Officer/Provost by July 2025,
- ☐ USMMA must hire 10 mission-critical faculty and support staff in Marine Engineering and Marine Transportation within 180 days,
- ☐ USMMA must develop a Human Resource Capital Plan and seek requisite Human Resource Management authorities from DOT within 180 days, and
- ☐ USMMA must complete an IT Infrastructure Plan within 90 days.

Governance, Executive Authorities and Financial Controls:

- ☐ DOT must clarify the Superintendent's decision authority and thresholds for Financial Management/Procurement, Human Resources Management, IT management, and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the oversight Boards at the Academy within 60 days, and
- ☐ USMMA must improve its financial transparency (regarding funding capacity, spending and need) relative to capital expenditures with DOT, and report these monthly to DOT.

Midshipmen Quality of Life:

- ☐ USMMA must complete HVAC upgrades, and mold elimination and abatement projects, within living, learning and working spaces within 180 days,
- ☐ USMMA must complete water and sewage projects to restore hot water to living spaces within 180 days,
- ☐ USMMA must update menus and food services to increase nutrition and provide more options for fresh food within 180 days,
- ☐ USMMA and DOT must provide students with 24x7 access to their academic email accounts from all devices and provide accessible Wi-Fi on campus within 180 days, and
- ☐ USMMA must provide updated guidance and support for midshipmen during Sea Year and about maritime careers within 180 days.

Introduction

The United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA), located in Kings Point, NY, holds a critical role in educating and training merchant mariners and leaders for service in the maritime industry, Armed Forces, and national security infrastructure. The USMMA Advisory Board—comprising experts across maritime, military, and academic domains—conducted a thorough review to ensure the Academy fulfills its mission effectively, efficiently, and sustainably. The Board acknowledges the Academy’s vital importance to U.S. national security, global commerce, and maritime resilience.

The Board’s 2025 report evaluates the Academy across three essential domains: Infrastructure; Governance, Executive Authority and Financial Controls; and Midshipmen Quality of Life; and provides Recommendations in each of these areas. The work reflects extensive engagement with stakeholders, site visits, surveys, and document reviews.

Infrastructure

*“The hot water hasn’t worked in my barracks all semester...”
“My classroom was closed because the roof leaked whenever it rained...”*

The Academy’s infrastructure—campus facilities, training assets, and IT systems—has deteriorated substantially over decades of deferred maintenance. Many academic buildings, barracks, the dining hall, and athletic facilities suffer from structural deficiencies, noncompliance with building codes, and outdated systems. Key findings include:

- The academic complex (including Samuels Hall and Bowditch Hall) suffers from water infiltration, HVAC failures, and poor ADA accessibility.
- The barracks require upgrades to plumbing, electrical, HVAC, and living accommodations to support modern training and quality of life.
- The waterfront and training vessels (including the *T/V Kings Pointer*) require modernization to support STCW compliance and realistic maritime training.
- IT infrastructure, including classroom technology, campus Wi-Fi, and administrative systems, is outdated, unreliable, and vulnerable to cyber threats.
- Energy and utility systems, such as steam heating, electrical distribution, and water mains, are aged and inefficient.
- Faculty are understaffed, with 30% of positions vacant. This leaves no time for academic pursuits, curriculum refresh, or support for student research and activities.

Despite over \$100M in capital improvement appropriations since FY21, MARAD's slow execution of capital improvements, exacerbated by cumbersome federal acquisition processes and historic preservation constraints, delays progress.

Governance, Executive Authority and Financial Controls

Governance challenges at USMMA arise from blurred lines of authority, fragmented oversight, and cumbersome financial controls. The Academy operates under the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), creating a unique civilian-military hybrid structure. The Board identified the following issues:

- The Superintendent's executive authority is constrained, requiring MARAD approval on many operational, personnel, procurement, and other actions.
- Budget formulation and execution is inefficient. USMMA lacks direct control over significant funds, limiting responsiveness and accountability.
- Procurement and contracting processes have been hampered by MARAD's layers of review, legal scrutiny, and Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) compliance requirements.
- Strategic planning and data collection mechanisms are underdeveloped, impeding evidence-based decision-making.
- Oversight boards' engagement, designed for external oversight and advocacy, overlaps and is not guided by conflict-of-interest policies.

These governance shortcomings weaken institutional agility, transparency, and accountability, directly affecting infrastructure renewal, academic programs, and midshipmen support.

Midshipmen Quality of Life

"I can't access my academy email and account when I'm underway so I can't complete my projects without using a personal workaround..."

"I'd like more healthy meal options and access to fresh fruit and vegetables on campus..."

The well-being, safety, and morale of USMMA midshipmen directly impact their academic performance, leadership development, and retention. The Board reviewed multiple dimensions of midshipmen life:

- *Campus Housing:* Substandard living quarters, HVAC failures, and plumbing issues negatively affect daily life.
- *Dining Facilities:* Aged infrastructure and inconsistent food quality undermine nutrition and morale. Midshipmen articulated that food has improved with recent personnel hires. However, a limited dining facility budget prevents flexible meal options, milk availability, and midshipmen food purchases outside of meal times, options available at other service academies.

- *Health Services:* Limited on-campus medical and mental health services create barriers to care, particularly following sea year deployments.
- *Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR):* Despite improvements, cultural challenges and reporting hesitancy persist. The Academy has made significant progress in hiring SAPR personnel, and in developing prevention education, and independent reporting channels.
- *Leadership Development and Extracurricular Activities:* Midshipmen face limited opportunities for athletics, clubs, and leadership programs relative to other service academies.

Collectively, these factors erode midshipmen satisfaction, readiness, and safety.

Immediate Recommendations

Priority one is resolving challenges with the Academy’s physical, human capital, financial and technology infrastructure. These items must be completed within the next 180 days:

- *Physical Infrastructure:* The Academy hired a new Facilities Executive in April 2025 and immediately began the development of a multi-phased Long Range Master Plan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. To address the nation’s urgent need for more merchant mariners, the Academy must quickly align its Facilities Long Range Master Plan with its Strategic and Human Capital plans and provide a comprehensive plan to grow the Academy’s capacity to produce Strategic Sealift Officers.
- Urgent issues pertaining to deferred maintenance and quality of life (described below) cannot wait for the full development of these plans. The Academy must demonstrably reduce the Academy’s deferred maintenance backlog with an integrated maintenance plan and report that progress monthly to DOT. Where issues regarding authorities for procurement or executive decision-making are negatively impacting progress, the Academy should communicate those to DOT.
- *Human Capital Infrastructure:* The Academy must hire a Chief Academic Officer/Provost **by July 2025**, as required by the March 2025 Middle States reaccreditation review.
- In addition, the Academy must hire 10 mission-critical faculty and support staff in Marine Engineering and Marine Transportation to align faculty teaching loads with the collective bargaining agreements, and to create opportunities for research, innovation, long-delayed and canceled sabbaticals, and to support midshipmen mentoring, research and innovation.
- The Academy must develop an integrated Human Capital Plan for orderly leadership and succession planning and seek requisite Human Resource Management authorities from DOT to effectively implement the plan (per below).
- *Financial Infrastructure:* DOT must increase the Superintendent’s financial and overall authority to be commensurate with that of the Superintendents/Presidents of the other four Federal Service Academies, the State Maritime Academies/Colleges and colleges and

universities of similar scope and scale to the USMMA. Where necessary, DOT should seek additional legislative authorities to enable the Superintendent to use non-appropriated funding for representational activities, support margin of excellence activities (i.e. clubs, athletics, guest lecturers, events), and other resources commensurate to the authorities at other Federal Service Academies.

- *Technology Infrastructure:* The Academy must complete its IT Infrastructure Plan **within 90 days** and update its technology infrastructure to support its education, training, professional development, maritime security and defense missions. This includes updating the technology and remote meeting capabilities in all campus facilities, and providing technology support for midshipmen during Sea Year, and email on campus.

Priority two is addressing the Academy's long-standing institutional governance, executive authority and financial control issues, which were critical failings in the March 26, 2025, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) reaccreditation review of the Academy's Planning, Resources and Institutional Improvements (Standard 6) and its Governance, Leadership and Administration (Standard 7). **These deficiencies must be addressed in the next 60 days:**

- Consistent with the needs identified in the infrastructure plans above, the DOT must clarify the Superintendent's decision authority and thresholds, with intent to eliminate bureaucratic waste and improve accountability. Similarly, DOT should clarify and/or amend the roles and responsibilities of the oversight Boards at the Academy.
- The Academy must improve its communication on academic, administrative, external and day-to-day processes, with an emphasis on financial transparency (funding capacity, spending and need) relative to capital expenditures with DOT, and report these monthly to DOT.

The final and most critical priority is addressing the overwhelming and long-standing midshipmen Quality of Life issues that pervade the campus. These include immediately addressing long-standing issues with living conditions, food service, technology, resources, and career planning. Once these basic needs are addressed, the Academy should undertake a comprehensive curriculum review, consistent with the needed academic hiring (to include modular learning, micro credentials, certificates, certifications and independent studies), to secure its leadership in industry-relevant topics such as LNG and other energy systems, AI, autonomous systems, cybersecurity, polar operations, analytics, shipbuilding, and maritime research. **The Academy must complete the following within the next 180 days:**

- Complete HVAC upgrades to provide adequate heating and cooling for midshipmen living, learning and working spaces,
- Complete all mold elimination and abatement projects,
- Complete all water and sewage projects to provide hot and cold water for midshipmen living, learning and working spaces,

- Provide fresh food and flexible meal options, milk availability, and healthy choices for daily, weekend and team movement meals,
- Improve IT support for ubiquitous Wi-Fi on campus, email on all supported devices, adequate bandwidth, and improved teaching, learning and simulation capabilities,
- Increase transparency around Sea Year costs by clearly outlining anticipated expenses, reimbursement processes, and expected timelines, to reduce financial strain and support equitable access for all midshipmen.
- Improve career guidance and support services, beyond current services, to provide pathways for midshipmen to explore at-sea and maritime industry career options, and

Longer Term Recommendations:

1. **ACCREDITATION.** The Academy must address the Middle States requirements and recommendations outlined in the March 26, 2025 report, and secure reaccreditation.
2. **GOVERNANCE, EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY AND FINANCIAL CONTROLS.** The Academy must review all faculty applications and make all faculty hiring decisions.
3. **ACADEMIC PROGRAMS.** The Academy should undertake a comprehensive curriculum review, consistent with the needed academic hiring (to include modular learning, micro credentials, certificates, certifications and independent studies), to secure its leadership in industry-relevant topics such as LNG and other energy systems, AI, autonomous systems, cybersecurity, polar operations, analytics, shipbuilding, and maritime research.

As part of these efforts, the Academy should update its curriculum and adopt industry-relevant education and training by exploring partnerships with the U.S Coast Guard Academy, U.S. Naval Academy, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. Navy's Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), and other government, maritime technology, engineering and simulation organizations, as well as by exploring partnerships similar to those between the U.S. Naval Academy and Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Lab (APL) and the National Security Agency (NSA) for cybersecurity training and simulations.

The Academy must also work with its state, national and international maritime academy peers, and with the U.S. Coast Guard, to reflect curricular and programming changes in the requisite standards for licensure.

4. **ACADEMIC PROGRAMS.** The Academy must implement and leverage external guidance and support for academic programs, including the experience, insight and guidance from external Advisory Boards, including Advisory Boards for the Provost/Chief Academic Officer, and, at a minimum, for the Marine Transportation and Marine Engineering Departments.

5. **ACADEMIC PROGRAMS.** The Academy must develop, support, and incentivize external funding opportunities for faculty and students, including research partnerships with other academic institutions, government entities, and industry; the Kings Point Scholars program; along with Fulbright, Marshall, and Rhodes Scholarship programs, among others, as fundamental to the Academy's educational and research mission.
6. **SEA YEAR.** The Academy should strengthen the Sea Year framework by evaluating and enhancing the preparation, onboard support, and post-Sea Year reintegration processes, ensuring midshipmen are effectively supported before, during, and after their time at sea. This includes developing a realistic preview of Sea Year for prospective students, combining virtual and in-person elements. Additionally, the Academy should assign a dedicated SAPRO role for Sea Year and invest in proactive, clearly communicated mental health resources.
7. **MIDSHIPMEN QUALITY OF LIFE.** The Academy must address gender harassment and SASH occurrences that persist on campus and during Sea Year, as they erode unit cohesion and inhibit the Academy and maritime industry from achieving excellence. The Academy should expand both institutional and contracted resources to better support faculty, staff and midshipmen facing challenges related to sexual misconduct and mental health. It must develop and publicize a clear, step-by-step guide for reporting sexual misconduct, and invest in digital tools that promote resilience, stress management, and healthy decision-making. The Academy must also provide faculty, staff, and contractors greater support to fulfill their roles in safeguarding and developing midshipmen.
8. **MIDSHIPMEN QUALITY OF LIFE.** The Academy should create intentional linkages between extracurricular, leadership, ethics and honor programs in a cohesive framework, and assess these programs as integral elements of midshipmen life. The Academy should also increase support for maritime-focused clubs and activities that build industry awareness and career exploration.
9. **ADMISSIONS.** The Academy should utilize data from the Student Information System (SIS) and other sources to explore aligning recruiting and decision-making timing relative to NCAA and other competitor programs to determine the potential for increased recruiting and applicant yield. US DOT and the Academy should improve resources and staffing in the Admissions Department to broaden Academy and maritime industry awareness and recruiting, particularly in the face of SSO and maritime industry workforce shortages.
10. **COMMUNICATION.** The Academy must strengthen and broadly communicate to its internal and external stakeholders and its constituents its strategic sealift mission, and its unique and strategic experiential learning focus across academics, athletics, the regimental system, leadership development and extracurricular activities.

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