



# U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Alumni Association and Foundation, Inc.

14 Bond Street, #1000, Great Neck, NY 11021 • Phone: 516-482-5274 / Fax: 516-482-5308

November 14, 2016

On behalf of the 15,000 members of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Alumni Association and Foundation (AAF), I'm happy to welcome the USMMA Congressional Board of Visitors back to Kings Point.

Past and present midshipmen are grateful for your service to the institution that we all hold so dear, and we are thankful for your attendance during such a critical juncture for our school.

Despite press reports to the contrary, the Kings Point family – alumni and administration – is unified in our commitment to the well-being of the midshipmen and to the perpetuity of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

I won't deny that the alumni and Academy leadership have honest differences, but reasonable people can disagree, without being disagreeable. For the past 70 years, we've worked hand-in-hand for the benefit of the Academy, and we intend to do so for the next 70 years—and beyond.

It is in this spirit that I speak to you briefly about the issues on today's agenda

I start with the Academy's academic standing.

As we all know, in June the Academy's accrediting body, The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (also known as "Middle States"), formally warned USMMA it is failing to meet its mandatory accreditation standards in five of 14 categories.

These "big five" areas included planning, leadership and governance, administrative staff qualifications, resource allocation and student services - are all essential to providing the quality education that has become synonymous with Kings Point.

It is understandable that the media has been focused only on one page of the accreditor's comprehensive report – student services – and its references to sexual assault and harassment.

Like every college and university, we must do our best to prevent any form of sexual misconduct and aggressively investigate any occurrence, while at the same time, throwing our full support behind midshipmen who are subject to any such incidents, be it assault or harassment.

Middle States accreditation committee helpfully provided a series of very clear, actionable recommendations to fix the shortcomings discovered in all five trouble areas, but it is critical to note the committee did not recommend -- nor even suggest the possibility -- that Sea Year be suspended for any reason, instead finding that "the Sea Year is perceived as a rich and valuable experience."

On this radical decision, we are in honest, frank disagreement with the Academy leadership.

We believe before making such a disruptive move, a move with such unforeseeable, far-reaching consequences, decision-makers would have benefited from an open discussion of facts and perspectives.



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That is why we created a task force to take an independent yet complementary look at what is happening at sea and on campus. Our task force is made up of distinguished alumni and leaders in the maritime industry and is being led by one of our earliest female graduates, Captain Eileen Roberson, USN (Ret).

This accomplished group has selected an independent third-party expert – with deep subject matter experience – to conduct the research necessary to inform future decisions.

At the same time, we have wholeheartedly endorsed Senator Kristin Gillibrand's common-sense steps to reinstate Sea Year with enhanced protections. Her ideas require no legislative action and are easy to implement; if acted on, they will ensure our midshipmen return to sea swiftly and safely.

I am in contact with the senator's staff and have offered AAF as a resource.

I know advocates for suspending Sea Year will say they are acting out of an abundance of caution and that even one possible instance of harassment warrants its halt.

I hear this argument. I am sympathetic to it, and I cannot say enough that one incident is one too many. But to preserve the viability of the institution for current midshipmen, we have to be able to tackle multiple challenges simultaneously without essentially shutting down a program so essential to the Academy that the Middle States committee concluded that "the Mission of the Merchant Marine Academy is intertwined with its experiential learning program of the Sea Year."

Our armed forces and merchant marine fleet do not have the luxury of halting their work while we idle the training key to their operations, and in reality, cutting midshipmen off from vital training risks putting both the maritime industry and our national security at risk.

Once Sea Year is restored, Academy leadership – and its alumni – can continue to direct energy and attention towards accreditation. In the coming weeks, the Alumni Association and Foundation will be convening a working group to help them do just that.

As we always have, the AAF stands ready to help the Academy live up to its deservedly high standards – and revitalize its legacy of excellence. We hope the leadership stands with us.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Capt. J F Tobin".

Captain James F. Tobin '77

President