

USMMA National Parents Association

Statement November 14, 2016

Board of Visitors Meeting- USMMA, Kings Point NY

Good morning.

My name is Susan Wagner McKenna, and I am the National Vice chair of the USMMA National Parents Association. My affiliation with Kings Point spans three generations. My father is a 1945 graduate who worked in the maritime industry both afloat and ashore for 70 years holding an active USCG Unlimited Chief Engineers License. My sister was among the first women admitted to Kings Point in 1974 and was the first female graduate to attain an Unlimited Masters License—she worked afloat for over 35 years, including 25 years as a San Francisco Bar Pilot, again the first female in that position. My daughter is a 2014 graduate currently sailing in the US-flagged fleet having already upgraded her license from 3rd Mate to 2nd Mate. Our family's lineage is the first that includes the daughter and grand-daughter of a graduate, with a collective 107 years in service to our country and the maritime industry.

My statement is on behalf of the executive board of the USMMA National Parents Association. Our president, Thomas Wesley, is out of the country today and I am delivering this statement for him at his request.

As a parent of a recent graduate, I have three issues I'd like to raise with you today.

*First is the suspension of sea year on commercial vessels.* We take the safety of our sons and daughters very seriously—I can't imagine a parent with anything less than a zero tolerance toward sexual assault and harassment against their, or indeed anyone's, children.

But, as parents, we believe our midshipmen when they tell us they think sea year is safe and it is the suspension of sea year that is causing them harm. Our daughters and sons are deeply frustrated that they have been barred from participating in the most effective training available and, as they say repeatedly in calls and emails home, they have no idea how the decision was made. They feel strongly that a decision of such consequence should have been as a result of a broad, transparent dialogue with the entire Kings Point community.

The Defense Manpower Data Center conducts biennial surveys called Service Academy Gender Relations surveys (“SAGR surveys”). While the DMDC releases the SAGR surveys of the other four service academies, the Department of Transportation releases its own report, ostensibly based on the DMDC study, but without supplying the actual SAGR survey report. Five academies—five DMDC SAGR surveys. Four are released to the public, but Kings Point’s SAGR survey is kept secret. Why is this so, when this lack of transparency can only result in distrust in the leadership of the DOT, MARAD and the occupants of Wiley Hall?

Compounding the problem and perhaps in a misguided attempt to make amends, DOT and MARAD pieced together a substandard “sea year” where midshipmen were sent to state training ships or government vessels.

Consequently, midshipmen are now being packed onto ships doing far less than they would on commercial ships and learning far too little.

Our midshipmen, who do not feel they could testify here today, have asked the Parents Association to make clear on their behalf that there is no substitute for training obtained through working on commercial vessels.

What I am about to say may come as a shock to you—it certainly did to me—but I must inform you that state school cadets are sailing on the very same commercial ships that DOT/MARAD has outlawed for our midshipmen for their “protection.” Remarkably, DOT/MARAD has made no effort to discourage state school cadets from sailing on those ships, claiming that it has no legal authority to stop them. It is impossible to believe that were the Maritime Administrator to issue a statement to the superintendents of the state schools that commercial ships were a serious threat to the welfare of their cadets that such a warning would go unheeded.

We are concerned that the DOT and MARAD may be using the issue of sexual assault and harassment to distract attention from the more comprehensive problem—that is the threatened accreditation of the Academy.

*Which brings me to my second issue.*

The Academy’s accreditation is in jeopardy. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) has placed the Academy on academic warning because it fell short in five of 14 key areas.

This is the only time in history that a federal service academy has been placed on warning status; equally worrisome is that the other schools on the warning list had only one or two deficiencies each. Only KP had five.

MSCHE has pointed out serious deficiencies. For example, personnel actions at the Academy sometimes drag out endlessly, with key positions unfilled for months on end. The academic dean left the academy over a year ago, but still has not been replaced. And while the professional faculty is filled with master mariners and chief engineers, there is no maritime leadership at Kings Point.

If we don't fix the accreditation issue, the very future of the Academy is in question. We have a short period of time to get our house in order. If not, we worry that the Academy will cease to operate and our midshipmen, our daughters and sons, will be stranded.

*Finally, I must talk about trust.* As parents, we want these challenges tackled quickly and effectively. But we're confused.

Take, for starters, Secretary Foxx's October 25th letter to Representative King and attached answers to questions sent to him on September 2nd by 13 members of Congress. Despite the need to address the five distinct areas where the Academy is currently deficient per accreditation requirements, his response focuses almost exclusively on the sea year suspension—not a MSCHE recommendation by the way—and a “cultural assessment”. The only other actions he reported were the filling of some, but not all, of long-vacant key staff positions, a vague reference to “efforts to address governance issues” and “a plan to develop a strategic plan.” Why isn't the Academy focusing simultaneously and equally on each of these five areas, especially given the March 1st interim progress report deadline?

Second, what does the Academy leadership actually know about sexual misconduct prevention? Every campus in America is confronting this challenge, and they are not closing their doors or shutting down key parts of their curriculum.

Smart academic leaders know that these issues must be handled carefully, with expert input and consultation with key campus stakeholders. Yes, this includes students—peer training and support is widely acknowledged as one of the most effective tools to combat sexual misconduct—and parents, who can reinforce the values of respect and tolerance.

These realities beg the question: is a federal contractor with absolutely no experience in handling sexual assault or harassment issues on college campuses the right organization to engage to interview our midshipmen and assess Kings Point culture?

Midshipmen report feeling pressured, even manipulated, during interviews with the MARAD consultants evaluating the Academy's culture. Students are calling their parents to express their discomfort. The conversations, they say, don't feel neutral. These accounts underscore the importance of the work of the Alumni Association's Task Force, which has retained an expert with relevant subject-matter experience.

The Academy cannot reform itself without the help of the Board of Visitors. We are grateful to have you watching over the institution we love. I beseech you to help save the Academy's accreditation and send our sons and daughters back to sea on the commercial vessels on which they belong.

Thank you.