



SUPERINTENDENT
UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE ACADEMY
KINGS POINT, NEW YORK 11024-1699

May 20, 2016

Dr. Elizabeth Sibolski
President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education
3624 Market Street, 2nd Floor West
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear Dr. Sibolski:

We appreciate the careful attention that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) Evaluation Team has devoted to its evaluation of the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA). We concur with the team's report. We have already begun to implement the requirements and recommendations in the final Evaluation Team Report necessary to improve the Academy's performance and meet the MSCHE standards for accreditation. In particular, the incidences of sexual assault and harassment have been of acute concern to me and my leadership team since I arrived at USMMA in 2012. While we have established a program based on best practices from the other Federal academies and across higher education, we recognize the need to bring fundamental change to the culture of USMMA and create a safe environment and an atmosphere of mutual respect that allows each Midshipman to grow and thrive.

USMMA has a long and proud history. Since 1943, the institution has provided the Nation with an exceptionally qualified cadre of talented and exemplary officers for the Merchant Marine and the Armed Forces.

Since 2009, the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Maritime Administration (MARAD) have taken substantial steps to strengthen the Academy's business processes and accountability. I have enclosed a letter from Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx expressing his personal commitment, as well as that of his staff and MARAD, to continue improvements at USMMA. Since I became Superintendent, we have improved the quality of life for our Midshipmen; placed a renewed focus on campus security and safety, including preventing sexual assault and harassment; modernized the curriculum; improved the capital infrastructure, including the barracks, the dining hall, and the waterfront; and added a new training ship. We continue to improve and strengthen USMMA's programs and to revitalize its facilities. We are all fully committed to taking all steps necessary to meet the requirements and recommendations in the Evaluation Team Report. We appreciate the confidence the Team expressed in our ability to succeed.

Since the Evaluation Team issued its draft report, USMMA, MARAD, and DOT have engaged in a number of substantive discussions on implementing the report's requirements and recommendations. We are confident that by the start of Fiscal Year 2018 on October 1, 2017, MARAD will have fully restored the means, authority, and responsibility for USMMA to directly manage its own personnel and procurement activities. DOT will seek the removal of restrictive financial management controls from legislation and returning financial management responsibilities to USMMA in order to improve financial planning and to support the effective, efficient, and timely use of institutional resources at USMMA. I must note, however, that ultimately it is up to the Congress to determine if and when the necessary legislative changes that you and we have recommended take effect, and that this political process can be time-consuming.

USMMA will begin the development of a new strategic plan in the fall of 2016. We intend to conduct a collaborative institutional process that will include greater involvement from staff, faculty, Midshipmen, and other stakeholders. We will publish the new strategic plan no later than summer of 2017 to replace the current 2012-2017 plan. The new plan will include better metrics for measuring progress towards strategic goals, including specific ways to connect the allocation of resources to the plan. As a preliminary step, a working group has begun to establish institutional learning outcomes, which, in turn, should drive the next strategic plan.

USMMA is in the process of filling the key personnel vacancies identified in the evaluation team's Final Report. The Director of Institutional Assessment reported for work on May 16. The Director of Public Safety and Security is scheduled to begin on May 31 and the Director of Admissions will start work on June 13. Interviews for a new Academy Chief Financial Officer and Director of Civil Rights are in progress and we expect that they will both begin work by August. We have begun reviewing applications for the Deputy Commandant and we anticipate he or she will begin work by September. USMMA completed a review of all its positions and provided a priority hiring list to MARAD in early May to ensure positions are processed in accordance with USMMA needs. This personnel review has also resulted in the addition of an additional full-time position as Assistant Sexual Assault Response Coordinator.

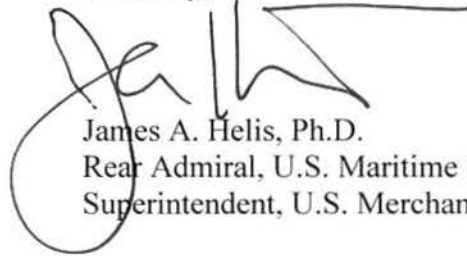
As I noted at the outset, the prevention of sexual assault and harassment remains one of my highest priorities. Since 2012, we have established a well-grounded program for sexual assault awareness and prevention, including a training program that begins during the first week Midshipmen arrive on campus, and continues throughout their four years at USMMA. The program established reporting and response procedures that include confidential reporting, trained volunteer victim advocates who can serve as confidential reporting sources, and the use of Midshipmen survey and focus groups to measure progress and inform program improvements.

We are now moving to address changing the culture of USMMA, which is necessary to eliminating sexual violence and creating an environment that is safe, recognizes the dignity and respect due everyone, and is sustainable. The Commandant of Midshipmen is refocusing Midshipmen training on the obligations of leaders of character to live honorably, respect the dignity of others, and step up and intervene when they see the first signs of sexist or disrespectful conduct. We are also intensifying our anti-harassment training and prevention program throughout the institution, with an emphasis on accountability.

Recognizing the importance of improving the safety and respect of Midshipmen during the Sea Year, MARAD will convene a conference of senior leadership in the maritime industry on June 24, 2016 to address the issue. MARAD and USMMA will use the conference to begin an on-going, unified effort to improve conditions during the Sea Year experience. Building upon our previous efforts, the USMMA will begin more detailed surveys of 100% of Midshipmen returning from Sea Year starting with the next group of Midshipmen returning in July 2016. This will help to identify incidents and provide support to those Midshipmen who require assistance.

I wish to thank the evaluation team again for their efforts. Their report provides us with the feedback we need to strengthen our institution and ensure that USMMA can better accomplish its mission of educating and graduating leaders of exemplary character who will serve the Nation's interests in peace and war.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Helis', with a large, stylized flourish on the left side and a horizontal line extending to the right.

James A. Helis, Ph.D.
Rear Admiral, U.S. Maritime Service
Superintendent, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy