

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 16, 2022

The Honorable Peter Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

On November 2, 2021, the Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration (MARAD) made the decision to pause Sea Year at the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA). MARAD promised Congress that Sea Year would be resumed by December 20, 2021. Although some Midshipmen have returned to sea, it is troubling that Sea Year has only partially resumed, though it is more than six weeks past the deadline. USMMA Midshipmen need Sea Year training in order to meet licensing and graduation requirements. We are especially frustrated that MARAD has not clearly communicated with Midshipmen, Congress, and stakeholders throughout this process. We fully support reforms to make sure our Midshipmen are safe at sea, but clear communication must serve as the bedrock of such reforms.

MARAD is tasked with ensuring that USMMA students receive the training they need to become Strategic Sealift Officers (SSOs) capable of supporting our military in times of national emergency. We are concerned, however, that a number of Midshipmen will have their graduation dates delayed because of the manner in which MARAD is handling restarting Sea Year. As of January 25, 2022, we received constituent reports that at least 35 students will be 50 days short of the number of sea days required to sit for their licensing exam and graduate on time. Congress has received no specific information on which ships are currently carrying cadets and have instead been given imprecise "two-week forecasts." This lack of transparent, comprehensive, and cumulative data makes it impossible for Congress and the public to know whether MARAD will be able to fulfill its responsibilities.

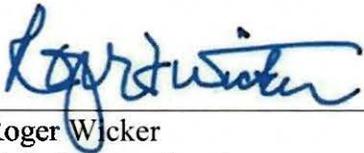
As part of its efforts to restart Sea Year, MARAD released a set of policies called "Every Mariner Builds a Respectful Culture" (EMBARC) in mid-December, 2021. These policies were intended to be implemented by commercial carriers as a prerequisite for carrying cadets for Sea Year and were purportedly designed to create safeguards against sexual assault and sexual harassment. MARAD has yet to provide documentation about how the feedback of students, unions, commercial carriers, experts, and other stakeholder groups were incorporated into the creation of this document. Cultural change and strategic planning to address these serious issues cannot be completed without the involvement of the entire maritime community. Many within this community have told us that their suggestions and questions to MARAD have gone

unanswered for months at a time, that they have been asked for their feedback but were told that it is unlikely to be seriously considered or addressed, and that they believe their feedback is being wholly disregarded.

We urge that MARAD focus on improving communication with Midshipmen, Congress, and stakeholders. First, we request that MARAD provide Congress with weekly updates with transparent data on the current status of Sea Year onboard commercial vessels and on the ability of students to obtain adequate sea days to graduate on time. Second, we ask MARAD to work with stakeholders to set up a transparent process by which they can create an open line of communication to respond quickly and clearly to questions and suggestions from individual stakeholders on how to implement the EMBARC program.

MARAD needs to meet its obligations to the students of the USMMA and to the nation. More transparent data on the Administration's progress and better communication with stakeholders is the first step.

Sincerely,



Roger Wicker
United States Senator



Susan Collins
United States Senator