



THE SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION  
WASHINGTON, DC 20590

January 6, 2017

RADM James A. Helis, USMS  
Superintendent  
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy  
300 Steamboat Road  
Kings Point, NY 11024-1634

Dear Admiral Helis:

Thank you and your team for working to address ongoing issues of sexual assault and harassment at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA). I know you share many of my feelings about the seriousness of these issues and the urgency of resolving them.

It is very important for the community to understand and internalize that this is a real problem and that it is laced within the culture of an otherwise proud and critical national institution. All of us want our young people to succeed, and we must work even harder to measure that success by building a culture of trust and respect beyond what we have today.

I recently received the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Culture Audit performed by Logistics Management Institute (LMI), and its findings should alarm all of us. The audit reinforces what the Defense Manpower Data Center, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the USMMA Advisory Board and our numerous interactions with Midshipman have told us: that, while the Academy's culture is grounded in a sense of service, discipline and teamwork, our young people are at far greater risk of sexual assault and harassment than they should be and that there are things we can do now and over the longer term to put a stop to it.

As you well know and understand, the acknowledgement and correction of sexual assault and harassment challenges within the Academy is a matter of national interest. Other military academies have faced similar challenges, and while perhaps not perfect, are working harder and better than we are to correct course. If they can do it, so can USMMA.

In coordination with Maritime Administration (MARAD) leadership, you are hereby directed to continue the vital work that you have started and to utilize the recommendations in the LMI Culture Audit to develop a comprehensive plan to build a climate of trust and respect at the Academy in which all Midshipmen are accepted and can learn and thrive in a safe environment. We must ensure—all of us—that each entering member of the Academy has the best chance of success, free from sexual assault and harassment, as well as other inappropriate behaviors such as bullying, hazing, retaliation and victim blaming, all of which have been reported and triggered a deeper investigation.

I further urge you to take aggressive action to put an end to denial and downplaying among those charged to be part of the solutions. Those who perpetrate or condone these behaviors or look the other way must have no place at the Academy, in the U.S. Merchant Marine or our Nation's Armed Forces. That's also true of our outside partners. Conversely, those who report such behaviors and who stand up for victims—in line with our core values—must be supported. Those individuals must be held up as role models and not subjected to retaliation and ostracism.

I have directed the Maritime Administrator to continue efforts with the shipping industry to address the climate at sea and the treatment of Midshipmen during their Sea Year training. Working with the MARAD Shipboard Climate Compliance Team (SCCT), you are authorized to resume Sea Year training on commercial vessels in a phased, company-by-company manner, provided that MARAD and the Academy have determined that a company has complied with the credentialing criteria established by the SCCT, as recommended in the LMI report.

In addition, you are directed to comply with the recommendations in the LMI report to improve the program, in consultation with MARAD and the shipping industry, to ensure Midshipmen are fully prepared for Sea Year and to improve communications between those Midshipmen at sea and the Academy.

I fully recognize that this challenge is not an easy one to meet, and improving the climate will likely result in more reporting and more enforcement action in the near term. While success may initially look like failure, the longer term objective will be an Academy where young men and women can thrive together without fear of such misconduct. Every single member of this Academy community must own this responsibility and be accountable to each other, to the proud past and future of the Academy and to our Nation.

Sincerely,



Anthony R. Foxx